



More Than a Feeling by moxbrose

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Summary: Partnering with Jonathan Byers on a history project is the least of Allison's concerns, considering her little brother Dustin is suddenly disappearing in the middle of the night and asking her about government conspiracies. Her life soon begins to spiral into a chaotic, confusing mess that tangles her in new romance, thrilling danger, and demonic creatures from another dimension.

1. Project Partners

Dustin still wasn't awake by the time I scraped his breakfast onto his plate. Mom was at the table, our cat Mews balanced in one arm as she precariously scooped eggs towards her mouth. Mews was managing to sneak them off her fork before she actually ate anything, but she still seemed pleased with breakfast nonetheless.

At least someone ate my cooking.

I sat the pan in the sink and stifled a sigh as I hurried down the hall. As I slid the door open, I found my little brother still nestled in his pile of blankets.

"Dustin," I tried again, picking my way over his discarded toys and clothes. I gave his arm a small shake. "Let's go. You have ten minutes before Will gets here."

He mumbled something indecipherable and burrowed further into his pillow. The small smile on my face couldn't be helped; as annoying as he is, he was admittedly adorable.

There's no time for cute this morning, though. I pulled his covers off and actually rolled him into his back. His bright blue eyes opened to slits, glaring up at me..

"Dustin. Let's go."

"Ten more minutes."

"You have to *leave* in ten minutes, kiddo. Up, now."

"Mom lets me have ten more minutes," he muttered; I rolled my eyes.

"Yeah. That's why you've been tardy three times this month. One more and you'll get written up."

Still mumbling to himself, he finally shoved to his feet and stumbled for his closet. I lingered long enough to make sure he didn't just lay back down, then crossed the hall to my own room. I stepped into my shoes, threw my bag on my shoulder, and snagged my Walkman off

my nightstand.

Dustin was thankfully shuffling to the kitchen; I ruffled his curls as I passed him. He made a noise of annoyance and swatted my hand away.

"Mom, Ally's in my personal space!"

"That's nice, dear," Mom said, eyes on Mews as she fed him bits of Dustin's toast.

"Mom, c'mon. That's Dusty's food."

"Why does the cat get my food?" He complained as I wrangled what was left of his toast out of mom's hand.

"Because you can't get up when I tell you to."

He flipped me off behind mom's back, and I did the same to him. He gave me his trademark gummy smile before literally devouring his eggs. By the time Will was knocking on our door, he was already dumping the plate in the sink.

"Did you even taste that?" I laughed, tossing him his bagged lunch as he pulled his backpack on. He shrugged and gives me a smart look.

"Not really. They were so runny they just slid down my throat."

"Brat," I teased, trying to look offended as I follow him to the door. He paused, just before he opened it, and gave me a quick hug around the middle. I kissed the top of his head before we pulled apart.

"See ya, Ally," he called, grabbing his bike and running for his friend; Will gave me a hearty wave.

"Bye Dustin. Bye Will!" I called, watching them ride off down the road.

I spotted Barb's Volkswagen trucking towards my house, so I leaned back in to say bye to mom and then pulled the door shut. My best friend and I grinned at each other as I climbed into the front seat. Instead of going down the road after the boys, though, we took a left

and headed straight for school.

"Nancy's not coming today?" I asked, turning up our favorite tape and settling into the seat. She gave me an exasperated look.

"Oh she is, but *Steve's* driving her."

I made a noise of annoyance and she nodded in agreement. Ever since she'd started hanging out with Steve, Barb and I had been pushed aside. I was grateful we had each other, but we were both a little bitter about our third best friend abandoning us.

"Maybe if I cut my hair short and do it up like Steve's she'll actually wanna talk to us," I teased under my breath as we headed for class. She hadn't waited at her locker - not like either of us expected her to. Barb giggled with me as we opened the door; Nancy was in her usual seat, looking like she'd been waiting for us.

"Good, you're alive," Barb noted dryly, dropping into the seat behind Nancy. I down in the desk beside her and fixed her with a bemused smile as she glanced between us.

"Oh come *on*. You're not really mad at me, are you?"

Barb and I shared a look as I shrugged at our friend.

"Of course not." She looked relieved for half a second before I added, "because I know you'll be sitting with *us* for lunch since you abandoned us this morning."

Her eyes widened a bit and she said quickly,

"But Steve asked me to eat lunch with him!"

"All three of you ladies are welcome at our table," Steve Harrington added smoothly, settling into the seat behind me. He fixed Barb and I with 'charming' smiles. "I'd love to get to know Nancy's friends a little better."

Nancy gave the two of us pleading looks; Barb and I shared an exasperated sigh, but I gave a quick nod. Barb shrugged and said to Steve,

"I mean, we had some pretty important lunch dates, but I *guess* we could grace you with our presence."

Nancy and I dissolved into giggles as the rest of the class poured in. Steve joined in as he leaned forward, jerking his head towards the back of the class as he sniggered,

"Now now, I wouldn't wanna get in the way of your hot date with *Byers!*"

Nancy and Steve made faces of repulsion as they glanced past Barb to stare at the guy in question.

I didn't know much about Jonathan Byers. He was quiet and shy, keeping to himself and hardly talking in class. He really wasn't *that* creepy, he just didn't socialize as much as we did. I'd known him since elementary school, but we'd both changed so much in the last ten or so years that we didn't even recognize each other. But Dustin was actually pretty fond of him, so he couldn't be all that bad, right?

"Oh be nice to him," I chided, turning back to give Steve a look. "He's just a little odd. I'd probably be the same way if Nancy hadn't latched onto me like a leech."

Nancy's mouth popped into a surprise 'o' and she stared at me as Barb snorted. Before Steve could jump in, the class was already beginning. I saw him sneak a wink to Nancy, though, and didn't miss her blush. He may not have been my favorite person, but if he made her happy...

Though Nancy and Steve whispered through the first half, I actually focused on the material. History was my favorite subject; it absolutely fascinated me. I jotted down notes quickly as we reached the end of class. As I was copying my last point from the book, Mr. Roberts cleared his throat and shut off the projector.

"Alright, class. To wrap up this section of the course, we're going to be breaking up into teams to complete a presentation of the chapter you're assigned. We're going to have teams of two, so listen up, I've already got you assigned..."

The three of us - and Steve - collectively groaned. All our other classes let us pick our partners, but now we'd probably be split up. Barb, Nancy, and I all turn to each other, fingers crossed, hoping for a miracle. Nancy's head snapped around when she heard her name.

"Alright, and we've got Nancy Wheeler with..." he skimmed the page as Nancy held her breath. "Barbara Holland."

The two of them hugged each other over the desks; I sent a semi-teasing glare, still waiting to hear my name. Steve's name was up next, but he'd been partnered off with some other jock that he air high-fived. *Good for them*, I thought sullenly. I didn't have any other friends I could hope to be stuck with. There were just a few names left when Mr. Roberts announced,

"Then we'll have Allison Henderson with..." I looked around the room for my prospective partner. Just as my eyes landed on him, Mr. Roberts finished, "Jonathan Byers."

There were *ooh*'s and muffled laughter all around the classroom, and I got apologetic cringes from Nancy and Steve. Jonathan met my eyes briefly, looking more upset than usual, then turned back to his notebook. I stifled a sigh; I mean, it could've be worse, right?

Nancy leaned in, still looking put off as she whispered,

"We can talk to Mr. Roberts and say you don't feel comfortable being alone with him. I'm sure he can get someone to switch -"

"Nanc, don't be cruel," Barb chastised, making a face at our best friend. "He's not some serial killer. Ally will be just fine."

"I know *I* wouldn't want him as my partner," Steve argued, as I managed to shrug my shoulders. I really didn't want to be mean, and Jonathan was pretty smart. Maybe it'd be an easy assignment, with both of us figuring it out. I mean, like I said, I was quiet and reserved too when I was away from Nancy and Barb. Maybe he was just really shy. Was it right of me to treat him poorly when I barely knew him past fifth grade?

"It'll be alright. I'll just get to know him a bit," I deflected before

Nancy could go at it again. As the bell rings, Mr. Roberts announced, "Come see me with your partners to get your chapter assignment!"

Again, Nancy and Steve looked at me like I'd just been sentenced to death. I rolled my eyes and grabbed my books off the desk as Nancy whispered,

"We'll wait for you."

"She's *fine*," Barb insisted, sharing my exasperated scowl as we shuffled to the front. Steve peeled off to go to his partner, and Nancy stepped up ahead of me with Barb.

I felt Jonathan at my side before I saw him. I turned and offered a warm smile, but he didn't even look at me. I pressed my lips together and faced forward again, standing in awkward silence with my unwilling partner.

Mr. Roberts smiled at us and flipped to a section of the book.

"I'm looking forward to your presentation. You both have such passion on the subject, I'm sure whatever you come up with will be absolutely delightful."

Smiling genuinely now, I glanced at Jonathan again; I had no idea he liked history too. He still didn't look at me as he took the slip from Mr. Roberts.

The moment it hit his hand, he shot out of the classroom. He swerved past Barb and Nancy and I tried to follow, confused at his reaction.

"Hey, Jonathan! Wait -"

Nancy snagged my hand and tugged me back; Jonathan was lost to the crowd by the time I pulled free. I whirled and actually scowled at her, catching her *and* Barb off guard.

"I need to talk to him! I don't even know our assignment!"

"Just get it later," she dismissed. "I didn't like the way he was looking at you. It was creepy!"

This time I frowned, less agitated now but still confused.

"What? He wasn't -"

"Every time you looked away he looked at you. The expression on his face was just *weird!*"

"It was a little odd," Barb agreed, and *that* made me worried. Barb was the rational one, so if it didn't look right to her...

"He's my partner though," I deflected, not wanting to linger on that conversation. "And I can't just call him up and ask him!"

Nancy doesn't seem concerned, mainly because Steve had found us and she'd broken away to walk with him instead. Barb nudged my arm though and offered a smile.

"I'll help you find him after school."

It wasn't hard to find Jonathan. His car was just a few spaces down from Nancy's; he was busy stuffing photography equipment into the trunk as Barb and I approached. He didn't look up until I stepped to his side and said,,

"You kind of ran away before we could talk." He actually stiffened, like talking to him has offended him somehow. He slammed the trunk but he still hadn't looked at me, skirting around me as he went around to the driver's side. Barb and I shared a perplexed look as I followed him. "Did I do something to you?"

"What? No," he scoffed, shutting the door. At least the window was down so I could keep the conversation going. I rested my hands on the ledge of the door and leaned down a bit to get to his eye level. He kept his head straightforward, not even sparing a glance my direction.

"Then why did you run away from me?"

"I'm not - I didn't run," he corrected, mumbling as he jammed his keys in the ignition.

"Why won't you look at me?" I pressed, and to my surprise this time,

Jonathan's head snapped around and our eyes locked. They burned with an unnamed emotion as he stared me down, harsh enough to encourage me to pull my hands off his car. Barb tugged my elbow and moved me back as he threw the car into reverse.

"Happy?" he challenged, then hit the gas and swung backwards, peeling out of the parking lot before I could string together a reply. Barb and I watched him go; it wasn't until his car was out of site that I realized I still didn't even have our assignment.

-X-

"I'm home!" Dustin shrieked, throwing the door open and scaring the life out of myself and Mews. The cat high-tailed it down the hall towards mom's room as I looked up at glared at him, shutting my math book.

"Do you mind entering the house like a civilized child?"

"I do," he informed me with a cheeky smile, sauntering into the kitchen. "Can I have a snack?"

"Yeah, grab some of those grapes in the fridge. We need to finish them before they -" I paused as he came into the living room, two oreos stuffed in his mouth. "Seriously?!"

"What?" he mumbled, spraying crumbs everywhere. I shoved to my feet and snagged the bag out of his hand, scooting past him and putting them into the cupboard over the fridge. "Ally!"

"We'll have them for *dessert*," I chastised, snagging the grapes and passing them off to him. "Work with me here a little, okay?"

"*Fine*," he sighed, pulling his backpack around and dumping the whole bowl inside. I pinched the bridge of my nose. "I'm going to Will's house, I'll be back for dinner -"

Will's house! My heart leapt up and an idea snapped into my head. I'd been worrying about the assignment since I'd gotten home; this was my chance!

"Hey, wait!" I said quickly, snagging the loop on his backpack and

tugging him back to me. "Do you know Will's number?"

"It's on the fridge," he told me, pointing to the doors literally coated in scraps of paper. "Like it has been for *years* -"

"I get the point," I said dryly, shoving him for the door. "Be safe, okay? I want you home by six."

"Okay!" he called, already out the door. The second I heard it shut I was tearing scraps off the fridge, searching for the number. We had dozens of old newspaper clippings, half-written recipes, a few coupons that had expired in 1980, and - yes! Three numbers scribbled on the paper.

Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler, Mr. and Mrs. Sinclair, Ms. Byers.

I snagged the phone and dialed fast, instantly pacing as it started to ring. After the fourth one, I heard the line pick up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ms. Byers!" I said as pleasantly as I could. "This is Allison Henderson. How are you?"

"Oh hi, Allison!" she said; I heard her moving around. "I don't think Dustin's here yet, but I can have him call you as soon as he is."

"Actually, I was hoping to speak to Jonathan, if he's there," I started, and heard her gasp. I felt my face flush; had he warned his mom about me? "If he's not, I can just -"

"Oh no, no! He's here. He's - hang on. Jonathan!" I heard her shout, before adding to me, "I just wasn't expecting - he doesn't get a lot of calls."

I heard a hand get placed over the receiver, and then a lower voice mutter something.

"Jonathan, take the call! I'm going to be late for work... *no* I'm not hanging up on her!... Just take -" the hand was removed, and she said cheerily, "Here he is!"

Nothing followed, though. The only thing I could hear was Ms. Byers saying goodbye to her sons, and then a door shutting.

"Jonathan?" I tried; I could have sworn I heard a sigh. "It's Ally. I was hoping to -"

Click.

My jaw actually dropped.

He'd hung up on me?! Seriously!? I slammed the phone down. I wasn't taking that for my answer. As I stepped into my shoes, I hurried down the hall to my mom's room. She was sitting on the bed, absorbed in her book. Mews was the only one who looked up when I poked my head inside.

"Hey mom?" she didn't look at me. "I'm going to the Byers'. I've got their number on the notepad by the phone if you need me, okay?"

"Have a good day at school, Dusty!" she said absently to me, smiling at her book instead of me. I stifled a sigh; close enough. I rushed back to the kitchen, scribbled the number by the phone, and then dialed Barb. She'd help me get the answers out of him I needed. But the phone rang and rang, finally just going to their answering machine.

I hung up before I left a message, and tried Nancy instead.

"Wheeler residence," her dad answered.

"Hi, Mr. Wheeler, it's Ally. Is Nancy home?"

"Fraid not, sweetheart. I think she's at Barbara's studying."

Fantastic.

"Great, thanks," I said, trailing off as he hung up on me too. Okay, seriously. That was getting old. Barb and Nancy had probably gone down to the library to work on the project. *Like I need to be doing*, I fretted, racking my brain for another person I knew with a vehicle. There was Steve, but I didn't have his number, and I mean... did I *really* want Steve Harrington driving me to see Jonathan Byers?

Nope. I abandoned my calls and went with plan B, opening up the garage as I picked my way across the clutter. Dustin's old bike was leaning against the far wall, like it was taunting me. Man, we *really* needed a car. I just sucked it up and grabbed the bike, wheeling it out and locking up the house before taking off down the road.

Thankfully the ride to Will's was easy, and I made it there in record time. I saw Dustin's bike - along with two others - sitting outside, and dropped mine in the pile. I could hear the boys inside, and heard a scurry of feet rush to the door as I knocked.

"It's *my* house, I get to answer!" I heard Will hush-argue as the doorknob turned.

"Well I'm *your* guest so I get to talk to her!" Lucas shot back; I barely hid the snort of amusement. I knew Lucas and Will had crushes on me. They were twelve. Subtle wasn't in their vocabulary.

"How do you like my *sister*?" Dustin asked in disbelief as the door opened. I gave him a dry look and he gave me a toothy grin. "Hi Ally!"

I narrowed my eyes to him and then looked down at Will, smiling. Lucas edged himself up ahead of his friends; Mike gave me a smile but luckily didn't feel the need to fawn over me.

"Hey, Will. Is Jonathan home?"

"He is," Lucas cut in, leaning in the doorway and giving me a sly smile. "But *I* can help you with whatever you need."

"Great," I teased, giving him a warm smile. I saw the blush light up his face. "Could you go get him for me?"

Will, Mike, and Dustin snorted as Lucas actually groaned, turning around and screaming,

"*Jonathan! Door!*"

He shuffled back inside, leading the three others after him. I stood patiently on the porch, hands folded in front of me as I waited. I saw Jonathan's head poke around the corner, but the second he saw it

was me, a scowl came over his face and he disappeared inside.

Okay, forget my manners. I huffed and came inside, shutting the door behind me. The boys, gathered on the couch arguing over what looked like a map, all looked up as I passed. I heard them scramble up as I paused in the doorway of the kitchen, listening in.

Jonathan had his back to me, aggressively making a sandwich and ignoring my existence. I crossed my arms over my chest and asked,

"Can I please just have our assignment?"

"No."

I moved in a few more steps, just the table between us now.

"Do I need to search your room? Because I will."

Jonathan finally turned around and gave me a heated glare, more annoyed than angry, but definitely getting there. I raised a brow at him in challenge.

"Stay out of my room. Got it?"

"What, you've got things in there you don't want me finding?"

There was smothered giggling behind us, and I saw annoyance flick over Jonathan's face. He tossed the knife he'd been using for the sandwich into the sink, then circled the table and snagged my arm. I let myself be led down a hallway, and then all but thrown into a surprisingly tidy room.

As my eyes started wandering - taking in the music posters and drawings on his wall - he slammed his door and then moved to stand directly in front of me, blocking my curious view.

"Can you please just leave me alone?"

"No," I said simply, arms crossing again, "We're partners. Which means *both* of us are going to work on this."

Jonathan pressed his lips together as he stared down at me, waiting

for me to elaborate. When I held my ground, he let out a harsh laugh and turned away.

"Go on then. Look around and tell your friends how weird I am. My weird posters and my stupid music -" he cut off and hit a button on his record player, turning it off. His mom's words came to mind. *He doesn't get a lot of calls.*

Something told me he didn't have visitors, either. I had a sneaking feeling, going off his last comments, that the few people who came over treated him the same way Steve and Nancy did. But I wasn't like them, and I'd prove it. I crossed the room to come up beside him and hit *play* again; he turned to look down at it, surprised.

"I like *The Clash*. And I'm not here to make fun of you." His eyes slowly trailed up to meet mine; his brow was furrowed, curious but not fully trusting. "I'm here to get our assignment so we can both work on the project."

I saw the guarded flicker of mistrust go over his face.

"You don't want to work with me. You just feel guilty."

"I don't -"

"Just let me handle the project. I'll get us an A and then you and your friends can go back to making fun of me."

"What? No, I'm not letting you -"

"You don't need to pretend to put up with me, okay?" he cut in, giving another harsh laugh. He pulled open a drawer on his dresser and started rifling angrily through the contents. "I know I'm the school freak. I get it. I just don't like being insulted in my own house."

"The only one insulting you is yourself," I informed him, watching as he tugged out a dark green vest and slipped it on. The patch on his chest said *Hawkins Hardware*. He straightened it out as he pointedly avoided my eyes. "Can you just stop assuming I'm a horrible person for a few minutes and hear me out?"

"No. I have to go to work. So you need to leave."

When I didn't reply, Jonathan's eyes flicked up to mine. I raised a brow in challenge and folded my arms over my chest.

"I'll leave as soon as you give me *our* assignment."

More irritation flitted over his face. He stepped around me and opened his door, motioning for me to go. I shrugged and then sat on the edge of his bed, arms still crossed, draping one leg over the other to get comfy. He stared at me for several long seconds.

"Please leave. I can't be late."

"Give me the assignment."

"Why can't you just let me do this?" he huffed, running a hand through his shaggy hair. "I'm good at History. I'll -"

"So am I," I cut in, voice a little heated now. "It's my favorite subject. You heard Mr. Roberts - he put us together for a reason. So just let me help you."

"I really need to go to work," he answered, eyes burning into me. I shrugged again.

"Guess I'll just have to wait for you to get home, then."

His face actually tinted a few shades of pink as he finally moved his stare off me.

"You can't just stay here without me."

"Sure I can," I laughed, and now Jonathan was pacing, shooting heated glares at me under his fringe of hair. "And when you leave, I can just search your room until I find the assignment."

He stopped and turned to tower over me. I didn't lean back, instead I tipped my head to look up at him in challenge.

"Your mom will miss you if you don't go home," he tried, and I actually laughed at that.

"Trust me, she won't know I'm gone."

"And your brother?" he tried, looking smug like he'd just won with that. I gave him a bemused stare, entertained by how badly he wanted me gone.

"We'll just hang out here with Will. I'll make us dinner, we'll watch some quality TV -"

"Why can't you just leave me alone!?" he snapped, turning away from me angrily and going to lean against his window, taking deep breaths. "Everyone else manages it just fine."

"Because I'm *not* everyone else. I'm your partner, and as soon as you get it through your thick skull that I'm here to help you, I'm not going anywhere." I saw Jonathan check the clock on his nightstand, and then give me an almost pleading look. I stood up, arms still crossed tight over my chest, and said gently, "just give me the assignment and I'll leave, okay?"

Jonathan and I stared one another down for several seconds. I could see the wheels turning in his mind, see him debating his options. I held my ground, watching him think. It was clear how little trust he had in other people, how many times he'd probably been betrayed and hurt by others just like me. But I *was* different. I knew how it was to be in his shoes, and I *knew* he wasn't as bad as Steve and the others made him seem.

Maybe Jonathan was seeing a glimpse of that, because he moved to his desk and grabbed a slip of paper out of his history book. He deliberated for another moment, but after glancing at the time again, he handed it over.

"I gotta go," he said briskly, going to step past me.

"Alright. I'll draw up the outline for us and we can get started tomorrow, okay?"

Jonathan paused in his doorway for another heartbeat, studying me like his eyes could see straight through me. I offered a small smile, and I saw him relax just a hint.

"Okay." He started to leave, but paused and then leaned his head back in to mumble, "Could you, uhm... could you actually make sure Will gets something to eat? I didn't think my mom's shift was this early..."

I saw the discomfort, and I was sure he didn't rely on asking people for favors. Did that mean he had a little trust in me, enough to watch over his little brother? I smiled a bit more and nodded.

"Yeah, I'll get him fed," I promised, and as he started to leave, I added, "have a good night at work."

He didn't reply, but I caught the hint of another blush on his cheeks before he disappeared down the hall. As I heard the door shut, I hesitated in his room. After glancing down at the assignment, I skirted his bed, snagged his history book and a pencil, then slipped back out of his room and shut the door.

The boys didn't even notice I was still there until they were packing up to leave. Dustin was the first to pass by the kitchen; he walked by and glanced at me, and then immediately backpedaled.

"Why are you here?" he started cautiously. "What don't I know? I don't like change -"

"Dustin, sheesh, take a breath," I cut in, rolling my eyes and shutting the history book. "We're staying to have dinner with Will."

Lucas, passing by, actually made a face of disbelief. He turned to Will and smacked his arm.

"You didn't tell me you were having dinner with Ally!"

"I am?!" he squeaked, then looked up at me, a goofy grin on his face. "Awesome!"

"This is bullshit," Lucas muttered, tugging his backpack up higher and heading for the door. Feeling a little bad about crushing his spirits twice in one day, I skirted around my brother and leaned out after Lucas.

"You forgetting your goodbye hug?" I asked, and he immediately spun around, grin wide on his face.

"No ma'am, I'm not!"

He wrapped his arms tight around my waist and I hugged him to me for several long seconds. After nearly ten, as I went to pull away, Dustin cleared his throat.

"If you're gonna try and get to second base with my sister, please do it when I'm not watching."

"Dustin Henderson!" I gasped, managing to pull away from the hug and glare at him.

"Then turn around next time," Lucas shot back, and now I whirled on him.

"Lucas!" He gave me a nervous grin and backed to the front door, Mike hot on his heels. I ruffled his hair as he passed, and he stuck his tongue out at me. "Get home safe, you two!"

"Bye!" they chorused, waving at us as the door shut. I turned back to the boys, rubbing my hands together.

"Okay, who's hungry?"

-x-

"This is like, the *best* mac and cheese I've *ever* had," Will gushed; I heard Dustin kick him under the table.

"All she did was put hot dogs in it. It's not a five star meal."

"Your words hurt, Dustin," I chided, getting up and taking my bowl to the sink. I grabbed two more from the cupboard and split the leftovers into them, then wrapped them and stuck them in the fridge. I figured both Ms. Byers and Jonathan would be hungry, and if I used their food, the least I could do was leave them some.

The boys finished eating as I wrapped up the outline for the history project. Once the dishes were cleaned, the three of us retired to the living room, turning on the TV to catch *Knight Rider*, one of the boys' favorite show. It was past eight o'clock, and still no one had come home.

"Are you usually alone like this?" I asked Will during one of the commercial breaks. He glanced at me and gave a small nod.

"I mean, I don't mind. It's not all the time. Just every now and then, Jonathan takes an extra shift. We need the money, and I don't mind being alone."

"Well, anytime you want, you can come over and eat dinner with us, okay?" I said gently. I saw a small smile creep onto his face as Dustin leaned around me, smirking.

"I told you she wouldn't mind."

I shoved Dustin back and ruffled Will's hair affectionately. As nine o'clock came and went, I saw both boys started to fade. I gently rubbed Will's shoulder and nodded to the hall.

"Bedtime, kiddo," I said quietly, and he gave a sleepy nod. "I'll be here till someone gets home, okay?"

"Okay," he said meekly, standing up. He paused by the couch, and then turned and wrapped his arms around my neck. "Thanks, Ally."

"Don't mention it," I promised, rubbing his back as he pulled away. "'Night, Will."

"Night," Dustin mumbled; he waited until we heard Will's door shut, and then looked up at me. "We're really staying?"

"Yes," I told him, snagging a blanket off the back of the couch. "I wouldn't want you home alone at night. C'mon, stretch out. You can sleep 'till someone gets home."

Dustin listened to me and curled up on the cushions. I tossed the blanket over him and pulled his legs across mine to let him stretch out. It was just reached eleven o'clock when I heard a car coming down the driveway. I gently moved Dustin fully onto the couch and stood up as the door opened.

Ms. Byers glanced over at my movement and gave a start, hand coming over her heart.

"Oh, Allison," she laughed, taking a breath. "I wasn't... what are you doing here?"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to overstep. I came by to work on an assignment with Jonathan and he had to go to work. So I just wanted to stay and make sure Will was alright."

Ms. Byers didn't look upset, or even mildly worried I'd been left alone in her house. She looked absolutely thrilled, clapping her hands together and beaming at me.

"You're an angel! Thank you so much!" she bustled into the kitchen, motioning for me to follow. "I keep telling Jonathan not to take extra shifts like this, I hate leaving Will alone. Thank you so so much for watching him for me."

"It was no issue at all, Ms. Byers," I assured. She gave me a smile as she dug into her purse.

"Oh please, call me Joyce. Here," she pulled her wallet out. "Will ten be enough? I know it was short notice -"

"No, no, really," I said quickly, putting a hand over hers and lowering the wallet. "No charge. It really wasn't a problem. Dustin had fun hanging out with Will a little longer, and I got the project started. Oh, and there's some dinner in the fridge for you and Jonathan."

For a moment it looked like tears actually came to her eyes. Her smile was full of gratitude as she put her wallet away.

"Thank you so much, sweetheart. I can't say it enough."

"Don't mention it," I assured, giving her a warm smile. "I'm gonna head out. Will is more than welcome to come by anytime he needs, alright?"

Joyce nodded quickly and grinned at me as I headed to wake Dustin. He wasn't happy to be up, but at least he didn't argue too much. I helped him into his jacket and herded him towards the door. Joyce rested her hand on my arm and gave me a deep look.

"How's... how's your mom doing? How are you and Dustin?"

As casual as the question was, I knew the meaning behind it. We heard that same thing almost daily for a year; the feeling in my heart never got any easier.

"We're good. As good as we can be," I said with a small smile. Joyce gave an understanding nod and squeezed my arm lightly.

"You let me know if you all need anything, okay?"

"Of course, Joyce. Have a good night."

Dustin and I rode home in silence, both tired and ready for bed. My mind wandered to Joyce's question as we rode. I hadn't thought about my dad in a while now, but it still wasn't any easier. I missed him, more and more every day. I'd always been closer to him than to mom, and when he died... Well, I lost both parents that night. And I'd promised myself I wouldn't let Dustin feel as lost as I did some days.

As much of a pain in my ass that he was, he was my baby brother, and I'd take care of him no matter what.

As we came around the corner of our street, both Dustin and I slowed seeing the car in the driveway. We came to a stop and stood on the sidewalk, staring at the house. My heart began to pick up speed, panic setting in. Of *all* the days I'd done something other than stay at home...

"I thought Don wasn't coming home until Sunday," Dustin said quietly. I glanced at my brother; my stomach churned seeing fear on his face too. I reached out and squeezed his shoulder.

"Go straight to your room and put your walkman on, okay? I'll handle him."

Dustin just pressed his lips together tight and nodded. We walked the bikes into the garage and I quietly lowered the door, and then led him around to the front. We eased the front door open and I went in first, looking around the corner.

Don had his back to us as he slammed pots around in the kitchen. Mom and Mews were nowhere in sight. I pulled Dustin in and slowly shut the door, then motioned for him to go. Just as we passed the

kitchen, the banging stopped.

"It's almost midnight."

The two of us froze; I quickly ushered Dustin down the hall as Don turned around. His eyes narrowed to dangerous slits and he took a step towards me. As much as I wanted to turn and run, I made myself hold my ground. *Take care of Dustin no matter what.*

"I know, I'm sorry. One of Dustin's friends was home alone, so we stayed to make sure -"

"Did I ask for a goddamn excuse?" he asked, voice low and dangerously calm.

"No -"

"What was that?"

"No *sir*," I whispered, fear trickling through me as Don took another step towards me. Most days I felt confident and strong, ready to take on any challenge that came my way. But right now standing in Don's shadow, I felt small. Small, scared, and sick with fear.

"You left your mother alone for *hours* just to play house with some ten year old rats?" he challenged, now towering over me. "I come home after a long week working to provide for this family, and you can't even have the decency to give me a warm meal?!"

"You said you'd be home Sunday -"

His hand locked onto my upper arm before I could move, and I was spun around. Don slammed me into the counter; pain blossomed up my back and I cringed down into my sweater.

"So when I'm gone, you think you get to do whatever you want!? You get to drop all your responsibilities and think you won't get caught?!" His hand tightened, bringing tears to my eyes. I tried to pull away and I saw the vein on his neck bulge. "You're gonna try and run away from me?! You think you can -"

"No, no, I just -"

"Don't interrupt me! You DO NOT interrupt me!" he bellowed, bending me backwards over the counter. I flinched and turned my head away; big mistake. Don's other hand came up and locked onto my jaw, fingers digging into my cheek as he forced my head forward. "*Do not look away from me, Allison!*"

I wanted to be strong, I really did. I just... I couldn't. Tears ran down my face and I couldn't make myself answer him. Don's hands tightened on me as he leaned closer, face just inches from mine.

"You're going to learn some goddamn respect, and learn it *fast*. Things don't change when I'm gone. Am I understood, Allison?"

"Y-yes s-sir," I whimpered, trying to ignore the pain as it burned even more. Don sneered and then finally stepped back. He jerked me away from the counter and threw me towards the hall. My foot caught on the carpet and I fell to my knees, barely catching myself in time.

"Get the fuck out of my sight, you goddamn waste of space."

I scrambled for my room without hesitation, rushing inside and shutting the door, eyes squeezed shut as more tears fell. I hated him, I hated this. I missed my dad. I missed just being a kid, not having to worry about Dustin or mom or Don...

If mom knew what he did, she never said anything. She was vulnerable. Losing my dad had really shaken her to her core and Don took full advantage. He ran the household. And I'd learned months ago that standing up to him not only got me in *more* pain, but it involved Dustin. The one time he tried to put his hands on my brother...

I couldn't let that happen.

I finally slowed my tears and managed to calm myself down enough to seem somewhat put together when I went to check on my baby brother. He was passed out in bed, my walkman on full blast, snoring peacefully. He hadn't heard any of my fight with Don.

At least, for now, he could just be a kid.

This is a commission from a good friend of mine, this is unbeta'd so let me know if there's anything that needs fixing!

2. Monominous Feelings

Fresh bruises littered my cheek and jaw. I grimaced at my own reflection, feeling around for my concealer. As I caked it on, I listened carefully to the activity just outside the door. It was quiet for now, but I didn't want to waste time. Don coming after me was one thing, but if he went after Dustin...

I did the best I could with what I had, which just lessened the darkening and at least disguised the shape of a hand. Not perfect, but it would do. When I heard Don start complaining about breakfast, I finished up and hurried out.

Dustin's eyes flashed to mine gratefully when I came into the kitchen. He was sitting next to mom, across from Don, looking painfully uneasy. Mom - Mews on her lap - was oblivious to the discomfort around her. At least she seemed to be enjoying the morning.

Don didn't look up at me as I passed him, but when I paused to kiss Dustin on the top of the head, he called out,

"Some of us would like to eat this morning, Allison."

"Make it yourself," I mumbled into Dustin's hair; he grinned up at me and I gave him a quick wink. As I scrambled the eggs and started on the toast, Dustin turned to look up at me. I raised a brow in question as I went back to the stove.

"Mike made us a new campaign."

"Yeah?" I asked, smiling at him over my shoulder as I tended to the eggs. "What's this one about?"

"Probably gotta find the Demogorgon," he said excitedly. "Last time, we got so close. Lucas thinks I'm wrong but I can just *feel* it! And Will even said -"

"Enough with this nerdy bullshit," Don cut in, glaring at Dustin over the paper. My little brother snapped his mouth shut and I felt my blood boil. "I want a quiet goddamn breakfast for once, and the more

you distract her, the longer it's gonna take this imbecile to make it!"

"He's not hurting anything," I defended, spooning eggs onto the plates and turning around. Don's cold eyes were narrowed up at me, not even blinking as I sat his plate in front of him. "I got the food cooked. Just leave him be."

"I thought we talked about respect," he hinted, eyes flicking down to my neck. I pressed my lips together and nodded, turning away and giving Dustin his food. My little brother had his eyes fixed on his lap. As I sat the rest of the plates down and took the seat beside him, I nudged his leg with mine.

"Tell me tonight, okay?"

He nodded solemnly, but I saw a small smile creep onto his face. We ate in silence, which I preferred over any conversation that might be brought up with our stepdad. Once we'd finished, I got up and collected the plates as Dustin scampered to grab his backpack.

As I dumped the plates in the sink and passed by Don to do the same, his hand came out and hooked onto my wrist. I didn't turn to look at him, but didn't pull away.

"I expect the both of you home right after school. And you'll have dinner ready by the time I get home."

I tried to tug my arm away as I argued,

"I've got a project for history. I said I would meet my partner after school -"

"Tough shit. I want your ass back in this house as soon as school's over."

I turned away and tried to pull free again without replying. Don's hand tightened around my wrist and he hauled me back, making me stumble back into the table. He turned my arm and made me face him as he growled,

"Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes sir," I whispered; he gave a curt nod and dropped his hold. The second he did, a hand fisted in my sweater and tugged me back. Dustin was staring up at me with wide eyes, my backpack in his other hand.

We both hurried through the living room - Dustin giving mom a quick hug goodbye - and went to wait on the porch outside. We were quiet for several moments before I felt Dustin turn to look up at me.

"Are you okay?"

I blinked in surprise, turning and staring down at him. He had a frown on his face, looking worried as I thought about my answer.

"He didn't hurt me," I lied, offering a smile. Dustin's expression didn't change. "It's alright. Really."

Will pulled up to the front of the house, but Dustin still didn't look away, didn't even move even when I got up. I held my hand out to him and he asked again,

"But are *you* alright?"

My heart twisted just a bit, seeing how concerned he was. My anger at Don only grew. I hated my little brother seeing something like that, being talked to like that. So I reached down and took his hand, pulling him to his feet.

"I'm fine, kiddo. I promise. And I'll be even better if you're not late for school."

He rolled his eyes, but pulled me into a tight hug. I hugged him back and ruffled his hair as we pulled apart. Forehead kisses from your sister weren't acceptable in public. As Dustin and Will rode off, I finally let myself slump back onto the stoop, shoulders hunching in.

Don's next business trip couldn't come soon enough.

It was just Barb and I again that morning, and I had a feeling it would be that way while Nancy "hung out" with Steve. The second I shut the door, her concerned gaze was on me. I raised my brows as I slowly buckled myself in.

"Is Don back already?" My eyes flicked to the car in the driveway, and I nodded quietly. "Are you okay?"

Sheesh, what was with that question today? I gave a quick nod and made sure my hair covered my (thankfully) disguised bruise.

"He wasn't happy I didn't get home until ten thirty, but -"

"What? Why were you out so late?"

My best friend and I cruised to school and I told her about my successful mission of getting my assignment. Which, thankfully, diverted the conversation from Don.

"So you actually went and hung out with Jonathan Byers?" she asked, sounding surprised. I nodded and smiled to myself.

"He's really not so bad. But I mean, mostly I just babysat Will and Dustin."

"At least he's letting you help with the project," she pointed out as we made our way to the building. I shrugged and nodded in agreement as we got our books from our lockers.

"For now," I sighed, and paused as we spotted Nancy and Steve. He dipped down and pressed a quick kiss to her cheek. "Huh. Think she's still gonna say they're just '*hanging out*'?"

Barb and I caught up to Nancy and made sure to tease her mercilessly before we went our separate ways. When we met back up in history, we were all excited to see *Project Work Day* on the chalkboard. Which meant that I'd get another chance to get myself onto Jonathan's good side.

Nancy, Barb, Steve, and Steve's partner - some jock named Adam - pushed their desks together. I hesitated, glancing back at Jonathan. He hadn't even looked my direction yet. The others urged me to join them, so I slid my desk to theirs and then got up.

"Just be nice to him, okay?" I prefaced, then made my way across the disjointed classroom. Jonathan glanced up when I paused in front of him.

"Wanna come work with us? I doubt a lot will get done, but I can at least show you the outline I did." Jonathan let out a heavy sigh; I raised a brow at him. "You're not getting rid of me. So either I drag a desk over here and it'll be you and me, or you can come sit with us and be mildly social."

He gave me a dry look, but to my satisfaction he grabbed his book and shuffled over to our group. I pulled a desk over for him and we both settled down. The group was quiet for a few minutes as the guys eyed one another.

"So, this is what I planned out last night," I said pointedly, tugging the paper out of my bag and passing it to him. The others finally broke their tense silence and got to work too.

Jonathan skimmed the page and then nodded, setting it down.

"Okay. This'll work."

"So you're saying my work was satisfactory?"

His dark eyes flicked up to me, narrowed in annoyance, but I caught the hint of a smile playing on his lips.

"Sure. Except the part where you left a six year gap in the timeline."

"What?" I asked in surprise, leaning over to him as he tapped the paper. I was acutely aware of how close we were. Our arms pressed to one another and our foreheads brushed briefly as I leaned closer.

"See? You stopped in 1776 and don't pick up until -"

"Wow, never had a girl that close to you before, huh Byers?" Adam laughed; Steve joined in. Jonathan immediately pulled away from me, face lighting up.

"Awe come on, you we're almost to second base!" Steve chided. "I bet if you ask nicely, you can get a kiss from someone besides your mom!"

I kicked him under the table.

"Knock it off!"

"It's *funny* Ally," Adam laughed. "Look! He's all red. He doesn't even know what to do with a girl."

Jonathan scooped up his book and made to stand. I caught his arm and tugged him back down. He gave me a quick, darting glance, like he was ready to take off at any second.

"Hey, cmon. They're idiots. Don't -"

When he went to stand again, Barb added,

"Don't pay them any attention, really. We usually just ignore them."

I gave my best friend a thankful smile; Nancy did her due diligence and distracted the assholes across from us as Jonathan slowly relaxed into his seat again.

"So what can we put here?" I prompted, tapping the timeline where he'd caught my error. His eyes studied mine for a few more moments, but when he saw my unwavering persistence, he sighed and opened his book.

We worked quietly together, ignoring the group around us. As uncomfortable as he was, he actually began to talk more to me. I did my own part and made sure not to put myself into his space again, and the class went pretty smoothly.

"Okay, then I'll do the first two years, you do the next two," I told Jonathan as we gathered our things. He nodded in agreement as we followed the crowd out of the classroom. "Alright then. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Hey, Allison?" I glanced at Jonathan in surprise; it was the first time I'd heard him say my name since elementary. "I was gonna see if you, uh, would want to come to my house after school? To work on our project," he added quickly.

Of course this is the one day I can't...

"I've gotta get home right after school," I sighed. "Family stuff."

"Oh yeah, it's fine. I just thought I'd ask," he said quickly, shrugging and stuffing his hands in his pockets.

My heart sank a bit seeing the hurt of rejection flit over his face. I was sure he didn't ask a lot of people to come over, and now I was being a jerk.

"What about tomorrow, though?" I offered with a smile. Jonathan's eyes went to mine; he saw the genuine question on my face and perked up.

"Yeah, Yeah. Tomorrow's good." He took a step away, then paused to add, "I need to make sure you're not messing up our project."

I gasped at him, and to my surprise he actually gave a full-on smile. I narrowed my eyes at him and backed up towards my friends.

"I'll see you tomorrow to make sure you know what you're doing, Byers."

He smirked and shook his head, turning away from us and heading for his next class. When I did the same, I came face-to-face with Nancy and Barb. They had identical devilish smiles on their faces.

"Were you just *flirting*?" Nancy teased; I felt my whole face light up.

"What?! No! I was just talking -"

"You so were!" Barb laughed; I shoved past my friends and tried to keep the blush off my face. I was not! I hardly *knew* Jonathan. Why would I flirt? I mean he was cute, but -

I cut off my own thoughts and blushed even harder.

"I mean he's weird, but so are you," Nancy offered. I glared at her. "Awe, you're bright red!"

"Both of you just shut up!"

"Ally and Jonathan, sitting in a tree..." Barb giggled; I smacked her arm.

My friends were the most obnoxious people in this town. Even over Dustin and his friends *combined*. I shook my head at them and led the way to our next class, keeping ahead of them so I could hide the hint of a smile toying on my lips.

Dustin huffed and threw his pencil down, scowling at me over his notebook. I rolled my eyes and went to correct his sentence, but he covered the paper with his hands.

"Dustin, it's not a real word."

"Yeah it is. Lucas told it to me."

"These are two different words combined in one," I argued, getting up to stir the spaghetti. "It's either monotonous or ominous. Not *monominous*. And in this case you want 'monotonous' -"

"Quit trying to write my essay for me!"

"You asked for my help!"

"Yeah, when I thought you were gonna actually *be helpful*," he shot back. "Your word doesn't even make sense."

"Yes it does!" When he kept scowling at me, I put a hand on my hip and pointed to the living room with the stirring spoon. "Go get it."

"What? No! I know I'm right -"

"Well I'm challenging you," I cut in, shrugging. "And we agreed if there's a challenge -"

"The other person has to prove their point. Yeah, yeah," he huffed, getting up and slinking away. I went back to focusing on dinner as I heard him flipping through pages.

"Son of a bitch!"

"Dustin!"

He muttered something I couldn't make out and came trudging back.

A moment later I heard him writing something down.

"So? I take it I'm right?"

He was quiet for a few moments, then mumbled, "monominous sounded cooler."

I giggled to myself and let him get back to his homework. By the time I had dinner ready, Don was just coming through the door. He passed by the kitchen and glanced at the table.

"Get that shit cleared off. This isn't a damn school house."

Barely avoiding a hearty eye-roll, I helped Dustin pick up his things. As I was putting my stuff in his bag, he knelt beside me.

"I don't like him hurting you."

I calmly finished zipping up his backpack and stood up with it, trying to hide the panic that surged through me. I hoped beyond hope he was only talking about this morning. If Dustin had seen anything last night...

"Me either, kiddo. It's alright, I'll play it safe tonight, okay?"

Dustin looked skeptical but knew we didn't have time to press the subject. He scampered down to his room as I set the table. As much as I wanted to talk back, I didn't want to upset my little brother. So when Don came back to the kitchen - mom and Mews in tow - I shut my mouth and kept it that way.

"See? It's not so hard to keep in your place," Don noted as I cleaned up our empty plates. I gave him a tight smile.

"No, sir."

He made a noise of acceptance and then got up, shuffling mom and the cat to the living room for the night. By the time I was finished cleaning the dishes, I could hear him snoring on the couch.

At least I'll have a peaceful night, I sighed in relief, heading for my room. Dustin was lying on his floor, holding his talkie up to get better

reception as he talked to his friends. I gave him a smile before slipping into my room and falling back on the bed.

All my homework was done; all that was left was the history project. I really wished I could have gone to Jonathan's. For school purposes, of course. Barb and Nancy were crazy. I wasn't *flirting*. I mean, yeah, Jonathan was good-looking. And he actually seemed to have a good sense of humor. And he was nice, and loved his little brother. He was so sweet -

Okay, enough Ally. This is ridiculous. You're just overthinking it. He's your FRIEND. Of course you don't LIKE him like him...

Okay, I needed a distraction. I went to my desk and tugged out my history book, skimming over the years I needed to cover in my report. Might as well do an outline, right? I cringed to myself, realizing that *homework* was what I did to relax. I was such a nerd.

But as I started doing my outline, I realized that some of my topics were gonna cross over with Jonathan's. And if we both covered the same things, we'd look disjointed. It would be better to get on the same page, make sure we weren't all over the place...

I jumped up and practically raced for the phone. I didn't get a line in my room like Nancy did, but our cord was thankfully long enough to reach down the hall. I dialed the Byers' number and then slipped back into my room.

"Byers residence, Will speaking!"

"Hey Will, it's Ally."

"Oh!" I heard him gasp and then clear his throat. "Hi Ally!"

"Hey! I was calling to talk to Jonathan. Is he -" Will sighed and mumbled,

"Yeah, he's here. JONATHAN!"

I heard footsteps, mumbled talking, and then,

"Hey, Allison?"

I smiled a bit; not a lot of people called me by my full name, and for some reason, I didn't mind it as much when Jonathan said it.

"Hey. I had a quick question about the chapters I'm doing."

"Oh, yeah. Yeah. Hang on, let me..." I heard him walking, then heard a door shut. "Okay. What's your question?"

I rattled off my thinking, and was glad he was on the same page. We spent a good twenty minutes planning out what we were gonna do, and finally I shut my history book, satisfied.

"Sorry to tie up your night doing homework," I apologized, moving to my bed and stretching out across it. "Perks of having a nerd for a partner."

Jonathan *actually* chuckled.

"Yeah, well, makes up for having a freak as yours."

Though I smiled, I could hear the honesty in his voice.

"You *do* even me out," I teased, and when he stopped chuckling I added, "but for the record, I don't think you're a freak."

"I am, though."

"Why do you think that?" when he didn't reply, I pressed on. "You just don't like socializing. It's not that weird. I wouldn't be as social if Nancy wasn't so outgoing. Until she started dating Steve, I hardly talked to anyone but her and Barb."

"Oh, so they're actually dating now?" Jonathan snorted; I couldn't help my giggle.

"Sorry, *hanging out*."

"That's what I thought."

"But really, Jonathan. You're not a freak."

He was quiet for another few moments. I wished I was there with

him, able to see his face and figure out what he was thinking. I heard him take a deep breath, and then say quietly,

"Thanks. That means a lot." As I went to reply, he added, "But I *do* think you're a nerd. For the record."

I laughed and shook my head, feeling my cheeks heat up just a bit. *This is NOT flirting*, I promised myself, despite the fact that we kept talking. And talking. And *talking*. Mostly about music, that seemed to open doors for him that he didn't often get to open. He made fun of my musical tastes and I made fun of his.

I hadn't even noticed what time it was until we both heard,

"Jonathan! I need to use the phone!"

"Hang on," he muttered to me; he put his hand over the receiver and shouted,

"It's 10 o'clock! Who do you need to call?!"

My eyes went to the clock. 10:04. Had we seriously been talking for three hours?! When Jonathan moved his hands away, I said sheepishly,

"I didn't realize how late it'd gotten."

"Me either. I guess I better let you go."

"Yeah, me too. It was nice talking with you though. Even if you don't like the Beach Boys," I teased, making him chuckle again. "I'll see you tomorrow, yeah?"

"Yeah, see you tomorrow. Night, Allison."

"Night, Jonathan," I said, smiling to myself as he finally hung up. I crept back into the kitchen to put the phone back on the receiver, mindful of mom and Don still sleeping in the living room. Dustin was passed out on his bed, radio in one hand and a copy of the DnD rules in the other. I smiled to myself, tucking the blankets up around him before finally heading to bed.

Despite the rough morning, I couldn't deny it had been a pretty good day. And, despite my arguments, I realized that I was maybe, *possibly* flirting with Jonathan Byers.

And I was okay with that.

Wow, I've gotten so much positive feedback, you guys are awesome! I'm so glad you like it! Keep being patient with me - we'll get to the canon story in just a few chapters, I just want to build up the world a bit. I really appreciate all your feedback! 3

3. Wouldn't It Be Nice

Glass shattered across the hall. I shot up in bed scrambled out of my covers as I heard Don scream,

"How do *you* like it when I take away *your* things?!"

"I didn't take it!" Dustin shouted, close to tears; I rushed out of my room. He was backed up against his bed as Don towered over him, tears running down his face, glaring up at our stepdad. His lamp was broken on the floor, and one of his comics was torn in half.

"What the hell is going on?!" I cried; Don turned to me, malice in his eyes.

"This waste of goddamn space stole my calculator!"

"I did not!" Dustin cried, and Don whirled back around. He jammed a finger into Dustin's face, making my brother flinch back. "I didn't take it!"

"Don, he didn't -"

"Shut the hell up, Allison!" he roared, and moved even closer to Dustin. My brother dropped onto his bed to try and get distance between them. I grabbed Don's elbow and tried to pull him back. He threw his arm back and forced my hand off. "I know you took it! It was in my bag last night! It's a three *hundred* dollar calculator! Do you understand that?! Did it just get legs and fucking *walk away*?!"

"Maybe it did, because *I didn't take it*!" Dustin shouted; I could see Don tense up. I froze, watching his movements. If he put his hands on my brother...

Instead of grabbing Dustin, he reached over and grabbed his walkie-talkie off the table. Dustin jumped up and reached to take it back. Don shoved his hand away and stepped back, lifting it up.

"Don't!" Dustin shouted, going for it again. The moment Don shoved him back I rushed forward. I ripped the walkie-talkie out of his hand and moved between him and my brother, handing the talkie back to

Dustin.

"Don't touch him," I said coldly, holding my ground as he came towards me. He went to step around me and I put my hands on his chest to bump him back. "Dustin wouldn't take your calculator."

"Then did *you* take it?" he threw out, vein in his neck bulging. "I'm sure the goddamn cat didn't! So where the hell is it?"

"Probably wherever the hell you left it!"

"What did I say about showing some fucking respect -"

I shoved past him, fuming, and made my way to the living room. As I'd hoped, he followed me instantly, leaving my brother alone. I knelt next to his work bag and dumped everything on the floor. No calculator.

Where else was he? I thought quickly; Don wasn't gonna give me much more interrupted time. Not in the kitchen, so that meant either the couch, or mom's room. I hurried to our couch and ran my hands around and under the cushions and, sure enough, the calculator was wedged between them. Right where he'd been sitting last night.

"Here. Go yell at the couch for pick-pocketing you."

I went to shove past him again but it seemed I'd pushed my luck to its limits. Don's hand locked onto my upper arm and before I could brace myself, I was slammed up against the living room wall. I kept the pain off my face; I didn't want to give him any satisfaction. I was too heated, seeing him act like that with my baby brother.

"You don't watch yourself, you little brat, and I'll be teaching you what happens when you disrespect me."

I gave him the most heated glare I could and tried to pull away. Don pressed my harder into the wall, but I kept struggling.

"The next time you put your hands on my little brother, it'll be the *last* time."

He actually started laughing, which was somehow more frightening

than his yelling.

"Are you threatening me?" he cackled; I tried to push him off me.

"It's not a threat. It's a promise."

In an instant the laughing stopped, and the words on the tip of my tongue disappeared. Don loomed over me, hard eyes going dark, cold with malice. He had me pinned to the wall with both hands wrapped tight around my upper arms; the ache in them was nothing compared to the fear racing through me.

I'd never seen him this mad.

"The next time *you* threaten *me*, kid, it will be the *last*. Do I make myself clear?"

"Y-yes -"

One hand came off my arm and hit me across the face hard enough to make my head snap to the side. I let out a gasp of pain but didn't react further, keeping my head turned away from him.

"What was that?"

"Yes sir," I whispered; finally, he moved away from me. I held perfectly still, barely breathing, as he straightened his tie.

"Now make yourself useful and clean up my shit."

I nodded and rushed to the bag I'd upended, shoveling all his things back inside with shaking hands. I forced my tears back; the last thing I needed was to start crying in front of Don. I got to my feet quickly and held the bag out to him. He took it from me and pointedly put the calculator back.

"Anything else of mine goes missing in this house, your brother's gonna be the one to pay for it."

Don left without another word, slamming the door hard enough to make the pictures on the wall shake. I squeezed my eyes shut and let out a breath, all the emotions of the past few minutes surging

through me and overwhelming me.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Dustin's head poking out of his room.

"Ally? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, kiddo. Hey, watch out for that glass."

The perfect distraction. Forcing my emotions back, I grabbed the vacuum and dragged it down the hall, ushering my brother back. I could feel his eyes on me as I cleaned up the mess, and when I went to pick up the lamp, he reached out and caught my hand.

"Your face is bleeding."

My eyes widened in surprise, and I turned to the mirror hanging on his wall. My cheek was dark red; I could already see the hints of a bruise forming. There was a small cut just underneath my eye along my cheekbone, and a few drops of blood had run down onto my cheek.

As I went to grab a tissue, Dustin's hand around my wrist tugged me towards his bed. He urged me to sit down, and then held up a finger, telling me to wait as he hurried out of the room. A few moments later, he returned with a damp washcloth and a bandaid.

"You don't need -"

"You helped me, so I'll help you," he said simply, not meeting my eyes as he wiped gently at my cheek. Once the blood was gone, his hand lowered slowly and he asked softly, "why is he such a bag of dicks?"

"Language," I told him lightly, reaching up and gently tipping his chin back to meet his eyes. "He just... I don't think he likes kids. He's just with mom for the easy money."

"From dad's insurance."

I nodded as Dustin gently put a bandaid on my cheek.

"With mom on her medication, she doesn't see the kind of guy he really is."

"If mom knew what was going on, she wouldn't still be married," Dustin said bitterly, and I gave his chin a gentle squeeze.

"She wouldn't," I promised. "But until mom's well enough to get off the meds, we've gotta handle this as best we can." When Dustin didn't answer, I said gently, "I won't let him hurt you, okay? And we'll get you a new comic."

"I don't care about the comic, it was Mike's anyways," he dismissed. I gave him a dry look until he added, "I don't want him to hurt *you*."

My heart tightened; I could see the sadness on Dustin's face. Saw his eyes flick to my cheek, and the bruises on my arms. As much as he hated hugs, I needed to give him one right then. I pulled him to me, and was surprised when he hugged me back, tight as he could.

"I promise I'm alright, kiddo. Okay?" Dustin gave me a dubious look as we pulled apart.

"What if we talked to Mike's parents? Mrs. Wheeler could -"

"No, absolutely not."

"What? Why not?"

"Because," I sighed, getting up and nudging him towards his closet to get dressed. "I can handle this, okay?"

"But -"

"Dustin, this stays between us. I mean it."

"Yeah," he muttered, eyeing me until I slipped out of the room. Once back in my own, I shut the door and leaned against it, letting out a shaky breath now that I was alone.

I'd considered telling someone, dozens of times. Every time Don put his hands on me, it crossed my mind. But Don was a smart guy, well-liked by most people in our town. He went golfing with Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Sinclair every other Sunday. He was old high school friends with Chief Hopper.

So who would they believe, their friend or his step-daughter? Bruises or not, he knew how to turn things around, and if he found out I reported him...

I wasn't risking it. And I prayed Dustin would let it go. I knew Don had scared him pretty bad, but he trusted me. Hopefully enough to let me handle it. How I was gonna do that... Well, I'd figure it out later.

Dustin, thankfully, seemed a little more calm when I finally came out. He was at the table, pouring milk onto a bowl of cereal. There were two more bowls sat on either side of him, waiting for mom and I.

Mom.

Don was usually the one to get her up when he was home, but that looked like it would fall to me today. I eased her door open with my shoulder, leaning inside. She was sitting on the edge of her bed, gripping the sheets as she stared out the window.

"Mom?"

She turned her head slowly, tear-filled eyes regarding me for a moment before they went back to the window. My heart twisted a bit. It always hurt to see her like this. She was spacey and distant with her medicine, but at least she was happy.

Without it...

"Hey, momma. Dusty made us breakfast. You want to come and eat?"

I heard her murmur something, but she didn't move. I sat beside her and grabbed the medicine bottles off her bedside table, starting to pour her medications out. She didn't say a thing to me as I did so, barely even blinking. She didn't even acknowledge Mews as he crawled onto her lap and butted her hand affectionately.

Dad's death had hit her hard. They'd been high school sweethearts, together for nearly 20 years. Dad had been on his way home from work. The speeding truck driver hadn't even seen the stop sign, and the t-bone collision was... well, the paramedics assured us he hadn't

felt any pain.

Dustin and I had been devastated, but mom... we lost her that night too. Before the medication, she'd been like this all day. Never speaking, never eating. Locked up in her room with the blinds drawn, staring at the wall for hours upon hours. At least with the medication, we had a little piece of her still.

She didn't fight me as I rested the medicine in her palm and grabbed her glass of water from the nightstand. She swallowed them obediently and went back to staring out the window. In about half an hour she'd be just fine. Or, as fine as she could be.

"Have a good day, momma," I said softly, kissing her temple as I got up and went to eat breakfast. Dustin was slurping the milk out of his bowl - dripping most of it on the table - when I sat down.

"Really?" I sighed, eyeing the mess as he licked his lips, satisfied. He gave me a toothless grin. "Go get a napkin, dork."

There was a knock at the door as Dustin was mopping up the table. I finished my cereal and hurried over, not surprised to find Will when I opened the door. He looked a little surprised to see me, but instantly blushed and gave a shy smile.

"Hi Ally. Is Dustin coming to school?"

"Yeah, he's just getting his backpack. Come on in," I said, stepping aside. Will nervously scampered inside and smiled at his best friend. I left them to it as I went and grabbed my own things. As I scooped my history book into my bag, I couldn't help smiling, thinking back to the phone call last night.

And, okay, maybe I was *kind of* looking forward to history class today. Maybe.

"Bye Ally!" Dustin and Will chorused from the living room. They were gone by the time I came back out, but Barb was waiting in their absence. I hurried to the car and hopped in, knowing we were running a little late.

"Forget to set your alarm again?" she teased, pulling onto the street. I

opened my mouth to reply when she gasped. "What happened to your face?!"

"That's not very nice, pointing out my horrible looks," I started to joke. When we came up to the stop sign, Barb turned her sharp gaze onto me.

"Ally. I'm not joking around."

My eyes dropped to my lap as I mumbled, "I know. Sorry."

"Are you okay?" she sighed after a few moments of tense silence. I nodded quickly; tears were welling in my eyes again. I didn't want to cry, and if I talked, I would. "It was Don, wasn't it?"

I didn't answer. It felt like if I acknowledged it, all the chaos would become real. As crazy as it sounded. And I didn't *want* it to be real. So I kept quiet until we pulled up to school. Barb shut the car off; as I went to get out, her hand wrapped around mine.

"Allison. I'm sorry. I didn't meant to pry. I just... I'm so worried about you."

"I know," I said again, voice tight in my throat.

"You know this isn't okay. I know you, I *know* you think you can handle it. But this?" her hand came up and cupped my cheek, turning my head to examine my injury. "*This* isn't handling it. What if this was happening to Dustin?"

"I won't let it," I assured her, and she sighed.

"Why are you and Dustin any different? You don't need to put up with this either. We could go talk to Chief Hopper. I'd be your witness. I know you think he won't believe you -"

"I can't risk it, not with his ties to everyone. And if he found out I ratted him out, and no one stepped in? I don't want to think about what would happen."

"Fine. Then we handle this ourselves," she said, voice full of authority. I lifted my eyes to look up at my best friend. She saw the

look on my face and said simply, "I'm not letting this happen to you. And if you don't want to go to Hopper, then you and I will take care of it."

"Barb, you don't -"

"I do, Ally. You're my best friend. You've been with me since kindergarten. I'm not letting you go at this alone anymore, okay?"

The tears couldn't be helped. I let out a small, watery laugh and threw my arms around my best friend, crying onto her shoulder. Barb hugged me tight to her, and the two of us sat like that until we heard the warning bell for class.

"Thank you," I sniffled, wiping the tears off quickly as we hurried across the parking lot. Barb nudged my arm affectionately and gave me a smile before we parted ways inside. I still had a couple minutes; I paused at my locker and quickly started putting my books inside.

"Hey Allison."

A shiver of warmth spread through me at Jonathan's voice. I glanced over briefly and gave a bright smile.

"Hey!"

"So uh, I found some articles we can use for a few of the chapters," he started; I heard papers shuffling. I grabbed a few books and shut the locker, turning to him. "I figured in history we could -"

Jonathan's words cut off as his eyes swept over my face. The light smile on his face faded, replaced with a concerned frown. I felt my cheeks flush and immediately started thinking of an excuse.

"What happened? Are you -"

"Oh, this?" I asked, giving a nervous laugh and touching my tender cheek. "I was roughhousing with Dustin and hit my face on his nightstand."

Jonathan's frown deepened just a hint, and his hand came out, taking my chin gently. He turned it and studied my cheek; my face flushed

even darker.

"Looks worse than just an accidental bump," he said slowly; as a group of students passed, he dropped his hand and shifted back a hint, aware of how close we were.

"I hit it pretty hard," I lied, shrugging. "Hey, I gotta go. Can't be late. I'll see you in history, okay?"

Before Jonathan could reply I spun and took off down the hall.

-x-

Nancy hadn't shut up about Steve. Barb and I were doing our best to fake our excited smiles, but it was a losing battle. I mean, yeah, I was happy she and Steve had an 'unofficial' thing, but I didn't want a play-by-play of their tonsil hockey.

Mr. Roberts got our attention as soon as the bell rang.

"Today is another project work day -" the class cheered, but went silent when he held up a hand. "*However*, it will not be a collaborative work day. The only person I want you sitting with is your partner. Don't think I didn't notice the lack of work done yesterday."

While the rest of the class groaned, I found I was actually looking forward to just working with Jonathan. And it was *just* because that meant we'd actually get something done. And I wouldn't have to worry about Adam and Steve being jerks.

"See you guys after class," I said with a smile, grabbing my stuff and making my way to Jonathan. He gave me a smile in greeting and pulled a desk up to his own. I sat down and instantly leaned a little closer, studying the articles on his desk.

"Wow, these are perfect!" I said excitedly, picking one up to read through it a little more. "Where'd you find these?"

"I used them last year for an essay," he said simply, but I saw the smile of satisfaction flit over his face. I gave him a wide smile and pulled out my notebook, already jotting down a few things that came

to mind.

"Hey," he said after a few moments, leaning down a bit to meet my gaze. I lifted my eyes as he asked, "are you really alright?"

I blinked in surprise at him, a million different answers running through my mind. But I forced down the ones I wanted to give and settled on a small smile as I said,

"I am. Really."

Still, he looked unconvinced, but I could tell he didn't feel confident enough to push the subject. We were friends, but we weren't close enough for him to start calling out my lies.

So instead, we settled into our work. We chatted idly about the assignment and even touched on some stuff we'd discussed last night. For once, class seemed to end too soon.

"I just don't get it. They're so lame, it's not even funny," he threw back at me as we shoved our books into our bags. I gasped and glared at him.

"The Beach Boys aren't lame!"

"They really are. The only songs they have are about surfing."

"Which is cool!"

"Which is *lame*."

"You're lame," I muttered, following him into the hall as the bell rang. He rolled his eyes.

"Nice comeback."

As I stuck my tongue out at him, he laughed and shook his head. He glanced around and, seeing as we were alone, he moved a step closer.

"I was wondering if you uh, you still wanted to come by after school. For the project," he added quickly. Doing my best to fight the flush creeping up into my cheeks, I nodded quickly.

"Yeah, definitely. We can get ahead if we finish outlining everything."

"Sounds good," he said, backing down the hall. "See you tonight, Allison."

As I waved to him, I heard a chorus of *ooh's* rise up behind me. I let out a gasp and spun, seeing Barb and Nancy smirking at me.

"Don't *even* start with me!" I demanded, shoving past them to head to our next class. They snickered behind me the whole way there.

-x-

"Uh, what are you doing?"

As I climbed onto Dustin's old bike, I turned to give my brother a questioning look. Except it wasn't just him; all the boys were staring at me in curiosity.

"Riding a bike?" I tried, wanting to avoid what I knew was coming. Dustin gave me an unamused look.

"I meant, where are you going? You never go anywhere."

"I have a life, you know."

"That's debatable," he threw out; I gave him a dry look. "The only people you hang out with have a car. So where are you going?"

"It's not safe for a beautiful lady to be biking around alone," Lucas added immediately, giving me a wide smile. Will nodded enthusiastically as Dustin groaned. "We can be your escorts!"

"I'm fine, thanks," I laughed, shaking my head at them as I rolled to the end of the driveway. To Dustin, I added, "I'm just going to Jonathan's to work on our project. If you need me -"

"Is that *all* you're going for?"

"Excuse you?" I asked incredulously as he shared a smirk with Mike.

"Well from what *we* heard, you and Jonathan stayed up *all night*

talking!"

I knew my face turned at least six shades of red, going by Dustin and Mike's laughter. Will looked embarrassed, clearly the source of the information, but Lucas looked disgusted. I took the moment of surprise to kick off and start riding down the street.

"Get back here!" I heard Dustin shout, but when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw he was calling after Lucas, not myself. A moment later, he pulled up beside me.

"We're hanging out at Will's today!" he called back, giving me a pointed look. "We'll make sure nothing unexpected happens."

"What, like her actually doing homework instead of Will's brother?" Dustin chortled, having caught up to us with the others. I gasped and leaned over to smack his arm.

"Dustin Nicholas!"

"Ooh, she used your middle name!" Mike laughed. Will snickered behind us.

"You're in trouble now."

I let the boys bicker as we rode down to the Byers. Will pulled up ahead when we coasted down the driveway, and was already scampering inside by the time we pulled up. Just as I sat down my bike, Jonathan appeared in the doorway.

He gave a friendly smile, but hesitated for a second, glancing beside me. I looked down to find Lucas glaring at him.

"She's here to *study*," he said pointedly, brushing past the older Byers as he headed inside. Jonathan gave me a perplexed look and I just shook my head.

"Ignore that," I started, only to be cut off by Dustin sidling up to us, Mike smirking at his side.

"Have fun you two, and be respon -"

"*Dustin*," I hissed, shoving him inside and giving Mike a look to follow. He didn't argue and went inside ahead of me. Jonathan seemed more bemused than anything, looking between myself and the snickering boys.

"Do I want to know?"

"Nope," I said instantly as he shut the door behind me, turning to lead us to his room. Lucas caught his eye as he passed, doing the '*I'm watching you*' motion as we passed. I shot him a hard look and he instantly spun around.

"Right, so," Jonathan chuckled, pushing his door shut as I came inside. "Ready to get started?"

"Actually, we have more important matters to discuss." Jonathan raised a brow as I pulled out a cassette. "You think The Beach Boys are lame. We're changing that."

He gave me a goofy grin and shook his head as I held it out. When he didn't automatically take it, I huffed and grabbed his hand, putting the tape in his palm.

He shook his head and crossed to his stereo, putting the tape in and pressing play. The first song to play was my favorite, *Wouldn't It Be Nice*.

We both sat on the edge of his bed. I busted myself with getting my textbook out as the song played through. At the end, as the next song started up, he *hmm'd* and nodded.

"Okay, okay. That wasn't half bad."

"Half bad?" I scoffed, turning to face him and giving an incredulous look. "That's their best song!"

He made a face as if to say '*that's sad*'. I smacked his arm playfully.

"You need to hear some real music, apparently," he teased, pulling my tape out and putting his own in. "Here. See what you think."

I sat the book aside and let the song take over, listening to it with my

full attention. I was more interested in watching Jonathan though, truth be told. He was into the music, opening up how I'd never seen him.

He bobbed his head to the beat and even mouthed some of the words, smiling at the lyrics he sang. As it ended he turned and gave me an expectant smile.

"That wasn't half bad," I teased, and Jonathan actually laughed. "What was that?"

"*That's All* by Genesis. Just came out last month."

"I *did* like it," I sighed, rolling my eyes as he smirked. "But The Beach Boys are still a hundred times better."

"They are not -"

His bedroom door swung open and we both looked over in surprise. Lucas was leaning in, frown on his face.

"Don't you two have a project to be working on?"

Jonathan gave him a frown as I rolled my eyes. I held up the book and gave him a pointed look.

"We are. Thanks, mom."

Lucas huffed and started to walk away, but leaned back to add, "the door stays open. In case of an emergency."

"Right," I snorted, shaking my head as he stalked down the hall. Jonathan turned his puzzled look to me.

"What's with him today?"

"He's just a weirdo," I diverted, not wanting to try and explain that situation. "But he *does* have a point. We should actually do some work."

Jonathan nodded in agreement and grabbed his bag, digging through it for his book. As he did so, a couple of photos slid out onto the bed.

He saw me staring, and sheepishly nudged them towards me.

"For my photography class," he explained as I sifted through them. I lifted up one - a black and white photo of a streetlight. The road disappeared into shadows and the light from the streetlight gave an ethereal glow to the bushes and trees it illuminated.

"This is beautiful," I breathed, studying the picture. "I love it."

Jonathan mumbled a thanks, cheeks bright red, head down to hide his eyes behind his bangs. It was a good look on him.

I looked through the rest on the bed, blown away by his work. Seriously, I had a hard enough time snapping a good picture of Dustin with my Polaroid. This was pure talent.

"You're really good," I gushed, reluctantly handing the pictures back to him. He somehow managed to blush even more. "Really. I love these."

"Thanks," he said again, finally meeting my eyes again sheepishly. "I love photography. It's been my thing since I was little."

"It shows," I promised, and gave a warm smile. Jonathan sat the pictures aside as we started to work; after a few moments he asked,

"Do you have a hobby?"

I paused in my writing and rolled my eyes up, thinking. After a moment, I shrugged.

"Not really. I mean, I love history. Museums are my thing. But don't think that's a hobby. Not like photography."

"Is that what you want to go to college for?"

I nodded enthusiastically.

"I'd love to. Maybe be a curator or something someday. I just don't think that'll happen for a while."

"Why not?" He asked; we both pushed our books aside and got into

more comfortable positions. I thought out my words carefully. I couldn't just come out and say *I can't leave my brother alone with our abusive stepdad*. That didn't work. So I gave him a simplified version of the truth.

"I don't want to leave Dustin right when I graduate. I'm sure you know we lost our dad two years ago. And since then... well, Mom was really knocked off her feet. I help her out and take care of him, so if I just left..."

"I get it," he promised, voice softer than I expected. "After my dad left, mom had to pick up extra shifts, and Will's already home alone a lot. If I took off for college in another state, I just..." he blew out a breath, and for a moment we stared at one another in mutual realization.

We had a lot more in common than we thought.

Jonathan and I spent the rest of the afternoon working as best we could. We did take a few music breaks - where he showed me some of his own mix tapes - and I even talked him into showing me more of his work.

Sure, we'd gotten a head start on our project, but the real takeaway was realizing just how much we had in common. And by the time 5 o'clock rolled around I felt more like old friends than project partners.

Dustin had waited for me; he and Will were outside watching us with smirks as Jonathan followed me onto the porch.

"So if we get the last few years lined out tomorrow, we could have it finished by next week I'd bet," I said with a smile, getting one back from Jonathan.

"Alright. We'll get it done," he promised. For a few moments we stood awkwardly on the porch, staring at one another, not sure what to do next.

I was a hugger; I never left Nancy and Barb without one. And Jonathan was my friend, so... I moved in fast, giving him a quick

hug. He tended up immediately, but when he realized what I was doing he eased into my hold and actually hugged me back.

"Get a room!" Dustin called out, making both of us blush as Will snorted and burst into a fit of giggles. I flipped my brother off as I backed off the porch.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, smiling and trying to force the blush off my face, just like he was. He nodded and held up a hand in goodbye as I got onto my bike.

"See you, Allison."

Dustin and I biked home, bickering the whole way there. We slowed when we came around the corner, but when I saw the driveway was empty, we both hurried home.

"I'm just *saying*, if you and Jonathan got married, Will could be my brother!"

I swatted him upside the head as I kicked the door shut. Mom was on the couch with Mews. She looked up and smiled wide as Dustin gave her a hug.

"You want Mac n cheese or chicken nuggets for dinner?" I asked, getting started on dinner.

"Both!"

"Pick *one* -"

As I argued with him, I caught sight of the answering machine flashing. I held up a finger to keep him quiet as I listened to the message.

"Don?" He asked nervously. I shook my head.

"Just Barb. Did you finish your homework?" He didn't answer; I rolled my eyes and pointed at his backpack meaningfully as I called my best friend back.

Half an hour later, mom and Mews were eating nuggets on the couch

as Barb, Dustin, and myself sat around the table arguing the finer points of time travel.

"There is no way you can go six thousand years into the future with *anything* powered by a potato," Barb informed my brother; he actually looked affronted.

"Well what's *your* idea then?"

"Something that actually makes sense?" I suggested, smirking at his unamused scowl as Barb snickered.

"What, did Jonathan give you that line when you were on the phone with him for six hours last night?"

My eyes widened as Barb's head whipped around.

"*What?!*" She laughed as Dustin smirked at me. Well played, kid. I scowled at him as I turned to Barb.

"It was *not* six hours!"

"Oh so you *did* call him?"

"Just for our project!" I defended. As Dustin got up to put his dishes in the sink, he said in a mocking tone,

"*For the record, I don't think you're a freak.* That's what you said, isn't it?"

"Go finish your homework!" I squeaked, turning bright red as a smirk spread over Barb's face.

"What about 'you *DO* even me out' -" I jumped up and shoved my brother down the hall as Barb doubled over laughing. I whirled around and glared at my best friend.

"Bedroom. Now."

"Is that what you said to Jonathan earlier when you went to *study?!*" Dustin called from his room. I dropped my face in my hands and shuffled after Barb, humiliated. Once my door was shut - and the

radio was on to drown out our voices - she asked in a hushed whisper,

"You so like him, don't you?"

"I do not -"

Barb gave me a pointed look over her glasses. I felt myself cave and fell back onto my bed, covering my face again.

"I kind of sort of *maybe* like him. A little." I instantly peeked at her and said sternly, "no teasing!"

"Why would I tease?" she laughed, laying down next to me. "Honestly? I think you two are super cute together."

"You think he's creepy," I argued, giving her a look. She shook her head, so I continued, "when we got the projects, you said the way he was looking at me -"

"It was weird, but I think he's just... awkward. Like you, before you met Nancy." I cringed. I was pretty socially inept before we'd met Freshman year. "But watching you and him working together today, it was sweet. You were both totally checking each other out the whole time."

"What!?" I gasped. "No. I wasn't - I don't do that. And Jonathan does *not* like me. He didn't even want to work together -"

"Oh he so likes you."

"Does not," I argued, shaking my head. Barb smirked at me and sat up; I didn't like that mischievous look. I sat up after her and watched as she made for the door. "What are you doing?"

"We're calling him. I want to prove a point."

"Barb he doesn't like me! I don't want to bother him -"

"Then *I'll* talk to him," she decided, grabbing the phone off the hook and coming back into my room. She held it out to me. "Either you or me, and you don't want it being me."

Glaring at her, I snatched the phone and stared at the numbers.

"What do I even say?"

"Ask him a question about the assignment," she told me, dropping back onto the bed. We both laid back and I took a deep breath.

I dialed his number and waited. Barb leaned closer and pressed her ear to the phone to listen.

"Hello?"

Oh god, it was him! Why was I so nervous? I'd called just fine yesterday! But admitting my crush on him to Barb made me feel like I'd screamed it to the world. Like he totally knew.

Barb nudged me to answer so I said quickly,

"Uh, hi. Hey. It's uh, it's Ally."

"Oh hey," he said; I could hear the smile in his words. "How are you? Everything alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm good. I just... I was wondering, I totally spaced on what I needed to bring tomorrow."

Barb gave me an '*are you serious*' look as I smacked a hand to my forehead. I couldn't have thought of anything better?!"

"Oh, I guess just your history book. That's really all we'll need." I groaned internally, this was so awkward. What was the point - "And yourself," he joked, catching me off guard. "I need you."

The grin on Barb's face looked painful; she started giggling as I felt my heart skipping beats.

"I-I mean, I need you to help with the project, you know," he backtracked quickly.

"Yeah, totally. I figured," I stammered. "Can you hold on a sec? Dustin needs me."

I pressed my hand over the receiver and glared at her.

"Quit laughing!" I hissed; she wiped the tears from her eyes and shook her head.

"Only if you tell him you don't have a ride tomorrow," she countered. I frowned.

"What? Why?"

"Just do it!" She giggled moving the phone back to my ear. I scowled but finally moved my hand away.

"Sorry about that."

"Everything okay?" he asked, and I glanced at Barb.

"Yeah. Just uh... Barb came by to tell me she can't take me tomorrow."

"Oh, well uh," he cleared his throat and Barb wiggled her eyebrows at me. "I could come get you. If you need a ride."

My eyes widened and I turned to stare at her in disbelief. Going by her grin, I figured this had been her plan. Since when did she turn into my personal matchmaker?!

She nudged me to answer again; I took a deep breath and managed to say,

"Y-Yeah. That'd be great, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," he said quickly. Barb dissolved into giggles and sat up to grab something off my desk. "I'll be there about ten till."

"Yeah, sounds great," I agreed as Barb laid back down. She had my polaroid in one hand. She scooted closer to me and held it up, taking a picture of the two of us. I grinned and playfully shoved her aside.

"Great," he said with another smile in his voice. "But I get to pick the music. I'm not listening to your mixtapes."

"I take offense to that," I laughed; the smile on my face couldn't be helped.

"Take it up with me tomorrow then," he teased, and I shook my head. "Good night, Allison."

"Night Jonathan," I said, and as soon as I heard the dial tone again I let out a squeal and covered my face. "I can't believe I did that!"

"Oh he so likes you!" She laughed, shaking out the picture to get it to develop. I watched as the two of us came into view.

"What's that about?" I asked, watching as she flipped it over and wrote something. She passed it to me and said smartly,

"A memento of your bravest act."

Giving her a look, I read her words:

11/3/83 - The day she took a chance, and succeeded.

I grinned at my best friend; I couldn't have put it better myself.

Y'all are absolutely amazing! I am getting so much love, I'm so glad you like the story as much as I do! Sorry this took a bit longer than the others, hope the chapter makes up for the wait!

Again, just a little longer. The canon story will start in Chapter 5, so one more before we get to the good stuff! Stick with me a little longer before the real fun begins!

4. Mix Tapes and Missed Moments

Dustin eyed me curiously as I paced the kitchen table again. He took a slow, methodic bite of his cereal; I had half a mind to shove his face in the bowl.

"Can you *please* just hurry up?" I urged, making another pass. He sat his spoon down and leaned back in his chair, folding his hands over his stomach. "Dustin! Come on -"

"Will isn't even here yet. Why are you trying to get rid of me?"

"What? Whoever said I'm getting rid of you? I just don't want you to be late!"

Dustin didn't budge, and I rolled my eyes. Okay, okay, so he had a point. I *was* trying to get him out of here. I really didn't want Dustin being here to see Jonathan pick me up.

It was the one thing I hadn't thought of last night on the phone; if he saw that, the kids would *never* leave me alone about Jonathan. That wasn't something I wanted to deal with for the rest of my life.

My little brother stared up at me expectantly. I pointed to his bowl as I went around the table again.

"Eat your cereal."

"I can't. My stomach hurts when I'm being deceived by family members."

He gave a cheeky smile as I narrowed my eyes at him. I pushed his bowl closer and passed behind him, nudging him towards the table.

"Eat through the pain. I'm not deceiving you. I just don't want another call about you being tardy -"

"You probably want to call Jonathan again and don't want me around so you can let out your true feelings."

"You're ridiculous," I scoffed, turning away to hide my blush. I caught

sight of Will outside and clapped my hands together. "Okay, time to go!"

"I'm not done -"

"Now you are," I told him, snagging his arm and tugging him out of his seat.

"I'm a growing boy! I need my breakfast!"

I grabbed a banana out of the fruit bowl and shoved it in the top of his backpack before I forced it into his hands. "There, taken care of. Come on, show some hustle!"

"Ally! Quit being crazy -" he tried to grab onto the door as I ripped it open; I swatted his hand down and ushered him down the driveway. "Allison! Just let me -"

Will watched us warily as I grabbed Dustin's bike and all but pulled him onto it. I gave him a tight smile.

"Hey Will! Have fun at school!"

"Ally!" Dustin argued; I pushed him and his bike down the driveway. He glared up at me and I gave him a grin as I waved.

"Your sister is weird," Will whispered; I rolled my eyes. I'd take weird, as long as I'd avoided that fiasco. I turned to go back inside when I heard him add, "is that Jonathan?"

I froze as I heard a car pull up to the house. Oh god. I couldn't turn around. I could *feel* Dustin's smirk burning into me, and for a heartbeat I thought about running down the driveway and forcing him to ride away before he could embarrass me.

But then Jonathan would ask why I was freaking out, and I'd have to explain, and just dig myself further into this hole... I shook my head.

Plan B then.

I turned and smiled at Jonathan and held up a finger before rushing inside and grabbing my things. I called a goodbye to Mom and then

headed back out.

Dustin and Will were at the end of the driveway, grinning between Jonathan and myself. I pointedly ignored them as I reached for the door. Jonathan leaned across the seat and pushed it open for me, smiling in greeting.

"Good morning," he said as I got in, shutting the door and glancing over to smile back.

"Morning. Thanks again, I know it's a little out of your way," I started, but he shook his head immediately.

"It's no trouble." As he went to pull onto the street, he caught sight of the boys grinning at us. I gave Dustin a vicious glare, and he just smirked. "Uh, what's up with them?"

"Who knows," I laughed nervously, keeping my eyes straightforward when I felt Jonathan look over at me. "You know what weirdos they can be."

Thankfully, Jonathan just chuckled in agreement and finally pulled away. I subtly flipped my little brother off as we passed him. We sat in silence for a few moments, until Jonathan reached up and put a cassette into the player.

To my surprise, Beach Boys started playing. I looked over at him and saw him blushing.

"I uh, I listened to your tape last night."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said, and then held down the fast-forward button. He paused a few times to check his place, and then stopped when we reached a familiar song. "This one's my favorite."

Sloop John B filled the car, and I let myself get lost in the songs. It was one of my favorites as well, and the fact that Jonathan had picked this one as his favorite... How did that make me like him even more?

When it came to an end and another song started, I turned and smiled at him.

"That's one of my favorites too."

"They're not too bad when they sing about something other than California and surfing."

As we pulled up to school, I gave him a playful smile.

"They're *always* good. But I can show you other songs without all the sun and surf if you want."

"Yeah," he told me as we climbed out. He smiled at me over the car. "I'd like that."

While we walked down the parking lot towards school, he dug into his bag and handed me a tape of his own. On it was scrawled *Best Music Ever*. I laughed as I turned it over, but when I went to hand it back, he gently curled my fingers over it. My heart skipped a beat.

"It's yours. I figured you could use some good music education."

Jonathan had made me my own mix? I couldn't help the blush that came over my face as I tucked the tape into my bag. He held the door for me and we went inside; he followed me to my locker, and I found myself grateful for his extended company. Now that he'd started to come out of his shell, he was actually pretty great to be around.

"We can listen to it on the way home if you want," he hedged, and I nodded enthusiastically.

"Yeah, I wanna hear it!"

He chuckled a bit and gave me a shy, warm smile. He went to say something else, but the warning bell rang.

"I'll see you in history," he said as he backed down the hall. I gave a wave and smiled after him.

"See you then!"

Once he was around the corner, I turned to head to class and nearly collided with Nancy and Barb. They both had the same expression that Dustin had earlier. I felt my cheeks turn bright red as I elbowed past them.

"Can I help you guys?"

"Not at all. We saw all we needed to," Nancy teased. I turned to glare at her. "Did he really give you a ride this morning? It's all *anyone* is talking about!"

I groaned and slapped a hand to my face as Barb giggled and looped an arm around me. Great. Poor Jonathan, now he was gonna be teased about *that* too.

"Oh don't worry. It'll blow over. And besides," Barb leaned in a little closer. "I was totally right."

As Nancy pulled ahead of us, I looked up at my best friend and gave a shy smile.

"You think?"

She shook her head and gave me a reassuring squeeze.

"I *know*."

Jonathan looked up at me as I paused at his desk. Class was just about to start; we had one more workday, and I wasn't wasting time.

"Nancy said Steve's home sick," I said, motioning to where she and Barb were moving desks together. "Do you wanna sit with us? It'll just be me and those two."

Though he looked apprehensive, he gave a slow nod.

"Yeah, let me grab my stuff."

I nodded and went back to the others as the bell rang. Nancy looked up as I moved one more desk to our clutter.

"Jonathan's joining us," I explained as he came up beside me. The two of us sat down together and for a moment, we were all quiet.

Until Barb felt the need to ask,

"Did Ally make you listen to The Beach Boys, or did you actually get to play some good music?"

I gasped and turned to stare at her in betrayed disbelief as both Nancy and Jonathan laughed. I turned my glare to them.

"We're listening to the good music on the way home."

"You guys are jerks," I muttered, opening my book. Nancy and Barb smirked at me as Jonathan gave me an apologetic smile.

"Sorry, I was always told it's impolite to lie..."

"Really?! You're supposed to be on my side!" I laughed, elbowing him playfully. The other two laughed, and the group relaxed into comfortable teasing and chatter as the class went on. I was relieved to see Nancy and Jonathan actually hitting it off - after all her comments a few days ago (and Steve's influence) - I was worried she wouldn't like my new friend.

But they seemed more than willing to work together, even going off into their own conversation about his photography. So much so that Barb and I ended up working on the projects as the two of them went off about techniques and framing and things I had no idea about...

"Quit glaring," Barb whispered to me, nudging my arm. I snapped out of my trance and glanced back at her, trying to hide my guilt.

"I was not -"

"You don't have to be jealous of Nancy," she promised, reading my mind like she always tended to do. "He likes *you*. And you're just as great as her anyways."

I gave her a small, genuine smile and leaned against her.

"You always know what to say. Thank you."

She playfully nudged me back upright and then reached over to jab Nancy with her pencil. When she and Jonathan looked over, they both realized we'd been ignored. Jonathan scooted a hint closer to me and leaned onto my desk to see what notes I'd done in the meantime.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to get sidetracked," he started, but I shook my head to cut him off.

"It's fine, photography is more important than this. Besides, we're pretty much done." I shifted my notebook to show him the final section I'd outlined. "See? Just gotta write it up and put it all onto a poster board."

"Are you busy tonight?" he asked, catching me off guard. My eyes widened a bit and I looked up at him in surprise. He turned a new shade of red and added quickly, "to, uh, to work on the project."

"Oh, oh yeah," I laughed nervously. I heard Barb stifle a snort so I kicked her subtly under the table. "Yeah, that's fine. Yeah."

"Uh, cool," he said, looking almost as flustered as I felt. As the bell rang we both gave a start, and then gave more nervous laughter. "Uh, okay then. I'll meet you at my car after school, okay?"

"Yeah," I said, at a loss for anything else to say. He gave me a smile as he gathered his things.

"See you later, Allison."

"Yeah, bye Jonathan," I managed, and the second he had his back to me I dropped my head in embarrassment.

"Yeah?" Barb asked, teasing me. I kicked her again as Nancy answered,

"Oh yeah. Yeah, totally."

"I hate you both," I muttered, grabbing my books and shoving them in my bag.

"But you don't hate Jonathan, do you?" Barb added, making both of them giggle. I glanced around and then flipped the both of them off.

Barb pulled me into a hug, and the three of us joked on our way to our next class.

All things considered, things were actually shaping up with Jonathan. And now I knew I had both my friends at my side for whatever happened.

Music was already playing in the car as I came up to Jonathan's side. He was leaning on the passenger door, arms folded over his chest and head tipped back as he relaxed. I leaned my hip on the door beside him and smiled up at him.

"Happy Friday," I said, getting a smile to come over his face. He lifted his head back up and turned to look down at me.

"You too. Wanna stop by the store and get some stuff for the poster?"

"Sounds like a plan," I agreed, and then felt my heart skip a beat as he opened the passenger door for me. "Thanks," I said with a fierce blush as I played it as cool as I could and got in. I copied his movements from this morning and opened his door as he came around to the drivers side.

"Thanks," he said back, and then watched as I fished out the tape he'd given me. "You really want to listen to it?"

"I do," I promised. "You've got me curious now."

He chuckled and took his own tape out before putting mine in. The first song was *That's All*, the same one we'd listened to yesterday. It was already growing on me; whether it was because I genuinely liked the song, or like it because Jonathan had showed it to me, I couldn't say.

We rode in companionable silence to the store, both bobbing along to the music. So far, he'd nailed the songs he'd picked. I couldn't find one I didn't like. As we pulled up to the store, he saw me smiling and asked,

"Like it?"

"You know your music," I agreed with a nod, getting out of the car with him and following him inside. His mom was at the front counter, and gave a double take when she saw us walk in. Her whole face lit up as we paused at the counter.

"Jonathan.. Ally! Hi, what are you guys doing here?" she asked us with a wide, cheery grin. I smiled back, but saw Jonathan turn a shade of red and scratch the back of his neck.

"We need some stuff for our project," he mumbled, and Joyce nodded eagerly, already pointing to a far aisle.

"I'll put it on my tab, just get what you need," she assured; I went to argue but she held up a hand. "My boss owes me. Don't even worry about it, sweetheart."

"Thanks, Joyce," I said with a smile. As I made for the aisle, I saw Jonathan hang back to talk to his mom.

"Is this what I think it is?" she whispered excitedly. I slowed down just a hint... what did she mean?

"Mom, not now," he hissed, moving to walk after me; she tugged him back.

"Are you two -"

"*Mom*," he cut in sharply; when I turned to look at him, his face was almost scarlet. I stared at him in question, but he just mumbled *come on* and led us quickly to the aisle we needed.

"Everything okay?" I hinted; I couldn't lie, my hopes were up. What was she referring to? Were we *what*? Had Jonathan mentioned me at home? My heart was racing; I had to pull my thoughts back in before I got carried away.

"Fine," he dismissed, stopping by the poster board as he refused to look at me. "Which one do you want?"

I studied the selection for a moment, tapping my chin as I examined the colors. After another few moments, I reached out and tapped a yellow one. He snorted.

"Are we presenting a project or directing traffic?"

"It's bright and cheery," I argued, pulling it out and holding it up to examine it. He moved a little closer to my side to look it over too.

"Is an ancient massacre *supposed* to be cheery?"

"Yep," I decided, grinning up at him. "Get some markers."

He gave me a bemused smile and shook his head, but did as I asked. We grabbed a few other supplies and then headed to the front. As she rang us up I pulled my wallet from my bag.

"Oh, sweetheart, don't worry. I'll cover this."

"I couldn't let you do that," I declined with a smile. "It's no problem. I'd rather you save your tab for yourself."

"It's just your school supplies -" she tried; I looked around and quickly grabbed a couple of candy bars. She gave me a knowing smile, realizing I didn't want her paying for our things, and reluctantly took my money.

"I'll see you later," Jonathan said quickly. Joyce caught on to his quick escape and came around to follow us out. "*Mom* -"

"I just can't get over how cu -"

"*Goodbye!*" He practically yelped, actually wrapping his arm around my shoulders to shove me out of the store. He leaned back inside and hissed something to her I couldn't make out before letting the door shut.

"You gonna tell me what that was, or...?"

"She just wanted to know about the project," he dismissed, though his red face told me otherwise. I tried to smother my smile as we got into his car.

When we pulled up to his house, I noticed no bikes outside. It was just about when the boys would be getting home, so it seemed they wouldn't be hanging out here today.

"Do you mind if I call Dustin?" I asked as we headed inside. Jonathan shook his head and pointed to the phone on the wall.

"Help yourself. I'll get everything laid out."

I dialed my house and leaned against the wall, watching Jonathan work as the phone rang. After a few moments, I heard the line pick up.

"Hello?"

"Hey kiddo, it's Ally."

"And where exactly are you?" he asked; in the background I could hear Lucas ask, "*is she on her way home!?*"

"I'm working on my project," I started, and he actually snorted.

"You were right Will!" he called, and then to me he added, "so what you *really* mean is you and Jonathan are busy making out for the rest of the afternoon."

"You know what? I called you to make sure you wouldn't be worried, and this is how you treat me?" I deflected; he didn't hear me over his own laughter. I turned away from Jonathan to hide the inevitable blush on my face.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay. When are you coming home?" I started to answer and he added, "or are you just gonna move in together?"

"I'll be home to make dinner," I growled, and hung up the phone. When I walked into the kitchen I saw Jonathan staring at me expectantly. I gave a quick smile as I sat in the chair beside his.

"Everything okay with Dustin?"

"Yeah, he's fine. Will and the others are hanging out with him so we have some peace and quiet to work."

Jonathan's gaze lingered on me for a moment as my words sank in. I realized how that had probably come out, being grateful we were alone... I mean yeah, I was, but still! Way to play it cool, Ally! Jeeze!

I cleared my throat and pulled out my notebook.

"We should, uh, we should get to work," I practically squeaked. When I peeked a glance at Jonathan, I saw his cheeks were tinted pink. God, what an idiot I was...

The two of us worked diligently for nearly an hour, mapping out our poster and starting to cut and paste the information. We were about halfway done when Jonathan brought up what I hadn't even considered.

"So... which of us is going to actually *give* the presentation?"

My hand froze in the middle of a sentence. I looked up at him sheepishly and realized exactly what a problem this would be.

"Uh... Well, I mean usually when I'm with Barb or Nancy, I just hold the poster..."

"Yeah, same," he sighed, and we both stared in defeat at one another.

"We could always just hang the poster up and make everyone read it," I suggested; Jonathan snorted and shook his head.

"Yeah, that'll work."

"Fine, then you get to present and I'll hold the poster," I said, crossing my arms to seal my point. He quirked a brow at me.

"I don't think so."

"You don't like my ideas, then you get to take the fall for us."

"You're too short to hold the poster," he argued, and I gasped in mock offense.

"Excuse you!? I am *plenty* tall -"

"You're barely above my shoulder."

"We're like the same height!"

"We are not!" he laughed, and I glared. I stood up instantly and gave

him a look. He stared at me, confused, until I ordered,

"Get up."

He let a wide smile spread over his face, realizing what I was doing. I crossed my arms to look intimidating.

"I'll get up. But if you're not the same height as me, you're doing the presentation."

"Good, an easy victory for me," I started, until he got to his feet. My eyes widened a hint when I realized my mistake.

Has he always been this tall? He can't be this tall! I panicked. He moved towards me and I took a step back.

"Something wrong?" he started, moving for me again. I shook my head and put the chair in between us.

"I changed my mind," I said quickly, skirting to the other side of the table. "I don't need to prove myself."

"You just know you're wrong," he threw back, starting around the table for me. I held out a hand to keep him away as I backed into the living room.

"I am not! And I'm offended you'd even say - hey! No, stop!" I laughed as he surged towards me, now that the table was out of the way. "Jonathan!"

"Come on, you were so sure about yourself just a second ago, Allison..." he teased, cornering me against the couch. I had nowhere to go. He took a step and I held out a hand again.

"Let's just agree to have you present, and I'll stand on a chair -"

He rushed towards me and I let out a squeak of surprise; he couldn't win this! On instinct I jolted back to try and keep him from measuring up to me, but I miscalculated my step. My knees hit the couch and I fell back onto it. Jonathan reached to steady me, but my momentum just ended up pulling him down too.

Right on top of me.

We were both draped across the couch, only inches between us. His hand was still wrapped around my upper shoulder - where he'd gone to steady me - and the other was on the cushion beside my head, barely holding him up off me. He had one knee kneeling between my own, the other up by my hip.

I had never, ever been this close to *anyone*, let alone the guy I had a crush on. I totally froze up, and I could tell by his expression that Jonathan had too. He was staring wide-eyed down at me, lips parted just a bit, eyes flicking between my own.

Neither of us moved.

"I'm sorry," he breathed, voice barely above a whisper.

"It's okay," I said instantly, and then realized how that sounded. It was okay that he was pinning me to his couch? It was okay that we were practically tangled in one another, alone in his house?

Yeah, it was.

Jonathan saw the shift in my eyes, realized what I'd said, and he swallowed hard. His eyes flicked between mine again, and ever so subtly, I nodded my head just a hint. Jonathan took a breath, and then moved to close the gap between us.

"I'm *hooooome*!" Will called from outside; the sound of his bike tires skidding on the dirt made Jonathan jerk backwards and fall off the couch.

I jumped up as the door swung open, desperately smoothing down my sweater as Will came inside. Fortunately, he was alone. Unfortunately, he was extremely observant, and I could tell by the look on his face that we didn't look as innocent as we were trying to.

Jonathan slowly pushed to his feet as I nervously tucked my hair behind my ear. Will looked between us, a wide grin growing over his face. I quickly turned to Jonathan and said,

"It's okay, it wasn't my favorite hair tie anyways. We don't need to

look anymore."

Thankfully, he was quick. He nodded eagerly and cleared his throat.

"Good, okay. Well if I find it lying around -"

"Yeah, just hold onto it for me." Will's smirk had to be painful at this point. I clapped my hands together, feeling myself beginning to turn bright red. "Right. Well, I've got to go."

"I'll, uh, I'll give you a ride," Jonathan offered; we both practically ran to the kitchen, and he helped me shovel my stuff into my bag. "Will, I'll be right back."

"No, take your time," he said slyly. I didn't miss the look Jonathan gave his little brother. Not different from the ones I constantly gave Dustin about the same thing...

The two of us practically bolted from the house. We clambered into his car and road in tight silence for all of two minutes. What had that even been? What would have happened if Will hadn't come back? God. Will had caught us doing... okay, I don't know *what* exactly, but it hadn't been innocent.

A snort escaped me and I propped an elbow on the door to bury my face in my hand. This whole day had just been... I couldn't help but giggle. And a moment later, I heard Jonathan chuckling too. By the time we came onto my street, we were both full out laughing.

"Did that really just happen?" I sighed, shaking my head and dropping it back onto the seat. I glanced at him and saw a wide smile on his face.

"Somehow I'm not even surprised." As I turned to press on with the conversation - going down the path of '*what just happened*' - Jonathan pulled to a stop. "Oh, you guys have a car?"

My stomach dropped; I'd been so caught up in spending the day with Jonathan I'd totally forgotten about the rest of my life. I instantly started to panic. It was just past 5:30, Don would be mad dinner wasn't ready. And that I was off 'abandoning my responsibilities.

What about Dustin? Had the boys been around for Don's angry homecoming? Had he gone after my little brother since I wasn't there? If he'd done anything to Dustin -

"Allison?" My head snapped up and I met Jonathan's worried gaze. I blinked quickly and offered a smile. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, yeah, I'm fine. I just - sorry. I spaced out."

"Are you sure? You looked really upset when you saw the car," he pressed, shutting his engine off to turn and face me. "Do you know who it is?"

"It's my, uh, my step-dad's. I just wasn't expecting him home from work this early."

As I stammered through a quick answer, I heard our front door open. Don moved out onto the porch, eyed locked on me, a scowl on his face. My whole body went tense as I saw him cross his arms over his chest. I was so dead.

"Hey. If something's wrong..."

Again, I forced a smile and shook my head as I gathered my backpack. There was no way I was opening this can of worms. Not now, not with Jonathan. I'd handled Don before and I could do it again. No matter how much I wanted to confide in him, it wouldn't do any good.

"It's okay," I forced; though Jonathan didn't seem to believe me, he saw I wasn't about to argue this with him. He let out a sigh but instead of pressing on, he leaned across me to open his door. "Thanks for driving me around, Chauffeur Byers."

He chuckled as he sat back and gave me a mock bow.

"Of course, Lady Henderson."

We gave each other goofy smiles as I got out. When I shut his door, he leaned down and gave me a parting wave. And then he actually stayed and watched as I walked up the driveway. Only once I got to our front porch did he finally pull away.

The moment Jonathan's car was out of sight, Don's hand locked onto my upper arm and towed me inside. He slammed the door hard enough to rattle the trinkets on the shelves; I winced as he knocked me against the wall heading into the kitchen.

"Now that you're done fuckin' around with your trashy little friend, I want dinner on the table. You understand me?"

"Yes sir," I said quietly, all the warmth and fun I'd had earlier today draining out of me. The moment he dropped his hold on me I scurried down the hallway. Dustin's door was shut - and probably locked - and I could only hope he'd been left alone.

The second I ditched my bag, I was doing our secret knock on his door. It slid open half an inch, and then once he saw it was just me, he opened it enough to let me slide in. Thankfully, his room looked intact - as much as a preteen boys room *could* - and he didn't look any worse for wear.

"Everything okay?" I checked, pulling him into a hug and ruffling his curls. He swatted my hand away but nodded as he went back to his desk.

"Yeah, i just stayed in my room. The guys left about an hour ago."

"Whatcha doin'?" I asked, dropping onto his bed and studying him as he picked up his pencil again. He peeked at me over his shoulder and motioned for me to come over. I leaned on the back of his chair and skimmed over his notebook.

"I'm compiling a game plan for Sunday," he explained. "Mike was saying it's gonna be crazy at the end. So Lucas, Will, and I are gonna plan tomorrow."

I heard Don starting to slam cupboards so I squeezed Dustin's shoulders and made for his door.

"You gotta walk me through it tomorrow, tell me your strategy."

He nodded eagerly as he scrawled away. I smiled at him as I shut his door and made for the kitchen, ready to get dinner over with. Don watched me cook as he downed his beer, never taking his eyes off

me. The second food was ready, I called for Dustin and herded mom in to eat with us.

Of course, it couldn't just be a quiet meal like I'd been hoping.

"Who was that boy that brought you home?"

Part of me didn't want to answer, but I knew what would happen if I kept quiet. If this was *my* dad asking, if this was a normal, happy family dinner, it would be a teasing answer. Dustin would probably chime in about the phone call and other studying, but tonight he was quiet.

"My history partner. Jonathan."

"Jonathan..." he hinted, giving me a pointed look. I stifled a sigh.

"Jonathan Byers."

"Lonny's kid?" he asked around a mouthful of corn. I nodded. "From what I hear, his kids are all fags. The fuck you doin' hanging around a fag?"

Anger welled in my chest; I could see the same look on Dustin's face that I was trying to suppress on mine. I took another bite of my food and said simply,

"He's not a... fag." the word felt wrong in my mouth and I did my best not to grimace. "He's my project partner. That's all."

"That's all, huh? Let me tell you somethin', kid. You keep hangin' around some freak like that, you're gonna turn out worse than you already are. You best stay away from that sorta low-life."

Dustin and I shared a quick look; like Don had *any* room to talk about who was a lowlife. But I knew better than to argue and simply nodded, thankful that we fell back into silence. Don finished first and disappeared from the table, much to my relief.

"He's a douchebag," Dustin mumbled into his glass of milk. Though I smiled, I gave him a light kick under the table.

"Watch your language."

"Watch *your* language," he threw back, giving me a toothless smile as he got up and took his plate to the sink. Mom wandered back to the couch to finish her soap opera, and Dustin took refuge in his room as I did the dishes.

I heard the front door open and glanced over, surprised to see Don had his coat on. He paused long enough to glance my direction and sneer at me.

"I'm going out. I expect you and your brother inside the rest of the night. You hear me?"

"Yes sir," I told him; he was slamming the door before I finished talking. Going out meant a long night at the bar with his friends. Which meant Dustin and I didn't have to mope around. I practically skipped to his room to poke my head inside once the dishes were done.

"Hey." He glanced up at me in question, miming that he was in the middle of something. I heard voices on his talkie, and I rolled my eyes. "Don went to the bar."

A smile spread over his face and he gave me a thumbs up, then motioned to keep his door open before he went back to scribbling down things in his notebook. I went to my room and actually spent the evening *relaxing*. I had my music on and a book lying open on my bed, for once not a school book.

I was just beginning to doze off, thinking about bed, when the phone rang. I glanced at the clock; half past ten. Who would be calling us this late? Had something happened with Don?

I reluctantly crawled off my bed and shuffled for the kitchen.

"H'lo?" I asked, stifling a yawn.

"Hey, Allison. It's Jonathan. Sorry to call so late," he started; I was instantly awake.

"Oh, you're fine. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just, uh, I wanted to check and make sure everything was alright. You seemed upset when I dropped you off."

I felt a smile spread over my face as I turned and hopped up onto the counter. He'd really called to check on me?

"I am," I promised. "Thank you for calling, though. I appreciate you doing that."

"Of course. So uh... we got a lot of work done today."

My cheeks instantly started heating up; how did he do that every damn time?! I made a noise of agreement as I twirled the phone cord around my finger. It was nice, sitting in the dark kitchen talking to Jonathan... it felt secluded. Private.

"We did. We can finish up Monday if you want, and we've got Tuesday to rehearse our presentation."

"I was thinking. Maybe we could take turns talking?" he offered; I could imagine the uneasy face he was making right now. "You know, go down together?"

I laughed. "Yeah, I think that's the best it's gonna get. We'll both have to suffer through it then."

"Maybe it won't be as bad if we don't do it alone."

Again, I felt my cheeks heat up. I smiled and looked down at my feet.

"No, I don't think it will."

We went quiet for a few minutes; I was just opening my mouth to go further when the kitchen light snapped on. I nearly jumped out of my skin and squeaked in alarm, looking up to see my little brother grinning at me.

"Dustin!"

"She is! She's totally bright red"! He confirmed to someone on the walkie just as I heard Jonathan shout in alarm.

"Will! Come on, seriously?!" he barked as I jumped off the counter. Dustin high-tailed it to his room as he laughed,

"I told you they were talking to each other!"

"I gotta go," I growled, and Jonathan made a noise of agreement.

"Yeah. I think we have the same... pest problem to deal with."

"Yep."

He blew out a breath as I heard him move through his kitchen. "I'll see you Monday, Allison. Have a good weekend."

"You too," I said, allowing myself a quick smile. "Night, Jonathan."

"Night Allison," he said as we hung up, both of us off to deal with the most annoying siblings this side of Hawkins.

Y'all, I am so overwhelmed by all the love and support I'm getting for this story! I am so thrilled you guys love it this much, and I hope you continue to do so! The good news is, we've reached canon events! Next chapter begins the first episode of Stranger Things!

I really can't begin to express how much your support means to me! As always, if there's anything you want to see/have questions about, reach out to me! As well, since this story is un-beta'd, I'm always ready for critiques and suggestions!

Thank you again, SO MUCH, for supporting this story! You all ROCK!

5. The Vanishing of Will Byers

Sunday, November 6th, 1983

Fifteen minutes till nine, and Dustin still wasn't home. To say I was worried was an understatement. He'd called me around six to say he was gonna miss dinner (which, y'know, he already had by an hour) and since then, radio silence.

Again, I tried calling over to the Wheelers, but I just got their busy signal. I knew Barb had told me she was calling Nancy later to find out more about the Steve situation, but seriously, two hours?! I groaned and hung the phone up, beginning to pace the kitchen again.

The only solace I had was that Don had left on another one of his business trips early this morning. If I'd had to worry about him on top of my little brother, I'd lose my mind. Mom was already in bed, and I was seriously beginning to consider just footing it to the Wheelers when I heard,

"I'll take your X-Men 134!"

Will!

I all but sprinted for the front door and wrenched it open, hopping out onto the porch in time to see him riding past the house. He saw me and gave a hearty wave as I heard my little brother huff,

"Son of a bitch!"

"Dustin!" I scolded; his head snapped around and even from here, I could see the guilty look on his face. "Get inside!"

At least he didn't fight me on that. He hurriedly wheeled his bike into the garage and then scampered past me into the house. He made a beeline for his room and I snagged the loop on his backpack.

"You told me you'd be home no later than 8!" I started in, getting a guilty look from my little brother.

"It went longer than we thought," he said meekly, shrugging as I

finally let him go. "We got stuck in this forest, and Lucas almost died!"

Despite the irritation - and lingering anxiety - I knew how much he'd been looking forward to this campaign. Yelling at him for being late wouldn't do either of us any good. So I stowed the 'Momma Ally' act and gave him a surprised look.

"Really? What happened?"

Dustin's entire face lit up and threw his hands in the air.

"Will and I had to fight our ass - I mean, fight our *butts* off to save him! But then I cast this Continual Light spell and I drove it away!"

"Dang, not bad!" I laughed, following him to his room. I settled myself on his bed as he went on and on, adding in sound effects and even a few action moves to his retelling. He didn't even stop when he went to the bathroom to put on his pajamas and brush his teeth.

"... and then Lucas was like told ya!" Dustin continued around a mouthful of toothpaste. "But I had a feeling. And you know what it was?"

"What?" I asked eagerly. He lowered the toothbrush and said menacingly,

"The *Demogorgon*!"

My mouth dropped in 'shock' and Dustin nodded eagerly before he raced back to the bathroom to deposit his toothbrush. When he came back his hands were in the air as he shook his head.

"It was chaos, Ally! Lucas wanted a fireball, but that's crazy!"

"Because Will would have to roll a 13 or higher, right?"

He nodded, giving me an appreciative smile. As much as Nancy teased me about it, I *did* know a few things about D&D.

"So I said protection spell. Play it safe, you know?" I nodded. "But Will went for the fireball."

He sighed and fell onto the bed next to me. I got up and helped him pull the covers up around him.

"Well, he rolled a seven. But the dice fell off the table and Mike went upstairs. So it doesn't really count. We're gonna do another campaign in a few weeks since this one went to shit."

"Seriously," I chided, frowning at him as I tucked his covers in. "Next curse word I hear out of your mouth is a ticket to a whole weekend indoors cleaning. Got it?"

"Yeah," he sighed, giving me a frown. I rolled my eyes but leaned in and gave him a kiss on the forehead.

"Your campaign sounds like it was awesome," I backtracked, getting a smile out of him. "I know you guys will get the Demogorgon next time."

"We will," he agreed with a fierce nod. "Night Ally. Love you."

"Love you too, kiddo. I'll see you in the morning."

I snapped off his light and finally started getting ready for bed. His recap had taken nearly an hour, but I knew how much he loved talking about the campaigns. And it was fun for me too, seeing how animated he got and how serious he was about it.

Even if it was just me giving up a little extra sleep, it meant the world to my little brother, and that's all that mattered.

Monday, November 7th

"Dustin! Let's go!" I called down the hallway as I tugged my sweater on. Okay, other downside to staying up and talking D&D - we both slept through our alarms.

When I didn't get a response, I sighed and hopped across to his room as I tugged a sock on. He was face-down in his pillow snoring.

"Up! Let's go!" I barked, smacking my hand against his door. He jolted upright at the noise and glared at me as he wiped the remnants of

drool off his chin.

"Some wake-up call," he started irritably.

"The first two gentle attempts apparently didn't do the trick. If I have to come back here one more time, you're getting water thrown on you."

"I'm getting up!"

"I'm serious!"

"I'm getting up!"

He flipped me off as he all but fell out of bed. I rolled my eyes and hurried to the kitchen to try and find something relatively edible for him to take to school.

Just as I started to rifle through the pantry, our phone rang. I snatched a couple of snack bars and grabbed the phone off the hook as I stuffed them in his bag.

"Hel-"

"Allison, it's me," Jonathan rushed, sounding on edge enough to make me pause my frantic packing. "Have you seen Will?"

I turned and peeked through the kitchen window. No rugrat on a bike.

"No, he's not here yet. Is everything -"

"Did he stay at your house last night?"

"Uh, no. I saw him ride past the house when Dustin got home, though."

"What time was that?"

"About five till nine, I think," I said slowly, frowning to myself. Dustin scampered into the kitchen and I motioned for him to wait a second. "Hang on, Jonathan."

I put a hand over the receiver and opened my mouth to ask Dustin, but he spoke up first.

"Oh, are you and Jonathan planning your wedding?"

I gave him an unamused frown.

"You're hilarious. Do you know if Will went straight home last night?"

"I don't know, I would assume so," he said with a shrug. "Why?"

"I don't know. Jonathan's asking about him. You're sure he didn't mention anything?"

"Not to me," he shrugged. I sighed and pulled my hand away.

"Dustin said he thinks he went straight home -"

"Wait, is Will not coming to school?"

"I don't know," I dismissed, trying to listen to Jonathan.

"Thanks. He may have just gone to school early again. But you know, if you see him or hear anything..."

"Yeah, of course. I'll keep my eye out -"

"Does that mean I get to stay home?"

"What? No, Dustin." I handed him his backpack. "Food's in there. Get to school before you're late."

"I really appreciate it Allison," Jonathan sighed. "I gotta go. I'll see you later."

"See ya," I said, hanging up as Dustin went on.

"I can't ride to Mike's alone! What about stranger danger?"

"Strangers will be the least of your concern if you don't get your butt to school."

"But what about Will?" He fretted as I herded him through the living

room. "What if he comes by and I'm not here?"

"If he comes by before I leave, I'll tell him," I promised, shoving him out the door. "I mean it, I don't want you late!"

He muttered something smart under his breath, but at least he actually got his bike and made for school. By the time I had gotten him going, Barb was already waiting. As I climbed into her car, I did another scan of the street. No Will.

"Everything okay?" she checked as we headed for school.

"Yeah, Jonathan called asking about Will. You didn't see him on your way down, did you?"

She shook her head.

"No, sorry."

"Did you talk to Nancy?" I asked, like I hadn't been trying to get through to the Wheelers all night last night. I saw a smirk come over her face as she nodded eagerly.

"I had to get off the line last night because she said he might be calling to say goodnight."

The two of us *ooh'd* and then snickered to ourselves as we pulled up to school. I did my best to put the worry over Jonathan's phone call out of my mind. Will was just fine. He had to be. He'd gone to school early, he'd be over at my house messing around with the boys when I got home. Just like always.

Barb and I practically ran into school, searching for Nancy. We spotted her rounding the corner, and both of us took off to catch up with her. Nancy caught sight of us just as Barb peeked down to her height.

"So? Did he call?" she asked, and Nancy immediately flushed a dark red.

"Keep your voice down!"

I peeked around Barb's arm and wiggled my eyebrows at her.

"Well, did he?"

"I *told* you guys, it's not like that!"

Barb and I exchanged a disbelieving look as we paused at Nancy's locker; while she tried to brush us off, I glanced around for Jonathan. Usually he got here when we did, and his locker was just on the other end of the hall...

"We just made out a couple times," Nancy deflected, snapping me back into the conversation. Barb mocked her dismissive tone and shook her head at our friend.

"Nance, seriously, you're gonna be so cool now, it's ridiculous," she sighed, sharing a knowing look with me as Nancy tried to play it off.

"You better still hang out with us," I added, and then made a face. "Please don't do something stupid, like become friends with Carol!"

"Or Tommy H.," Barb added, shuddering. We both made noises of disgust as Nancy scoffed.

"I'm telling you guys. It was a one time..." we both gave her pointed looks, and she flushed again as she opened her locker. "Okay, *two-time* thing."

As she pulled the door open, she trailed off and grabbed a piece of paper wedged inside. *Meet me. Bathrom.* - Steve was scrawled on it. Barb and I playfully nudged each other and gave Nancy knowing looks.

"We'll see you in history," Barb assured, grinning at our friend as she backed down the hall. Barb and I giggled with one another the whole way to class. *Just friends* my ass. Just before we turned the corner, I checked down the hall.

No Jonathan in sight.

My disappointment grew even deeper when I saw his desk empty.

Barb and I had been running late, and nearly the whole class was there. I tried to hold out hope he'd show up, but when the bell rang, I actually felt myself deflate a little.

I'd really been looking forward to seeing him. History was a nice little niche in my day, because I got to spend forty minutes pretending to study while we just joked and teased each other.

Trying to keep me out of my sulk, Barb managed to wrangle me into working with the others. Steve was back, which meant I had to suffer through his and Adam's incessant talking. My best friend gave me a supportive smile as I pulled my binder out - which only grew when she caught sight of the picture I'd taped on front.

"You kept that with you?" she laughed, smiling down at it. The two of us - laying on my bed as I talked to Jonathan - smiled back. I nodded and grinned up at her.

"If I could make it through that call, I can make it through the day," I told her, making her burst out laughing. The two of us tried to contain our giggles, which worked as well as holding water in a noodle strainer.

"What's with you two?" Nancy whispered, watching the two of us try to swallow our laughter. Adam leaned in and grinned at the group, shrugging.

"Probably heard the newest rumor going around."

"And what would that be?" I managed to ask, though I still had a goofy smile on my face. Adam leaned in a little further.

"Word in the locker room is that Byers is totally crushing on Nancy."

The other four of us actually blanked at that information. Nancy turned red, Steve turned pissed, and Barb and I stared at Adam in surprise. He took our silence as a plea for him to continue.

"Yeah, I guess after you guys flirted all class last week the word started getting around. Something you're not telling us, princess?"

Nancy immediately started to defend herself - as Steve got even *more*

pissed - while Barb and I sat back. My mind was racing. I mean, Adam was an idiot. Most the people in this class were. So what did it matter that they were jumping to conclusions?

Except *I'd* thought the same thing. So was *I* an idiot? Were the others onto something like I thought I'd been? It didn't help I'd always been jealous of Nancy, and now the *one* time I legitimately liked someone -

"Hey, space case," Barb murmured, nudging me gently. I snapped my worried gaze onto her and she gave me a soft smile. "You *know* Adam's full of it. I was right here with you last week and I didn't see any flirting. I promise you."

"I know, but I mean... It's *Nancy*," I stressed; as my best friend, of course she knew all my insecurities. "And if other people noticed -"

"No one else did. Adam's just talking to get attention, Al. If I'd seen anything going on, you know I'd tell you. But it was just innocent talking last week. Okay?"

I let out a heavy sigh but nodded, despite my lingering unease. Barb nudged me again and gave me a goofy smile, getting me to laugh.

"Thanks," I mumbled, leaning on my best friend briefly before we got back to work. The rest of the school day seemed to drag on, because every chance I got I was checking for Jonathan. I wasn't obsessed, okay? I was worried. After his worrying call this morning, and no word about Will, I was on edge.

So when the final bell of the day rang, I practically bolted for the parking lot in search of Barb. I wanted to get home, and get home *now*. I'd only gotten to the front lawn before I was stopped, though. Nancy caught up to me and gently tugged me to a stop; when I turned to look at her in question, I saw a guilty look on her face.

"Look, Ally. What Adam said in history was bullshit, okay?" I blinked in surprise, and she pressed on. "I don't like Jonathan like that, like at *all*. And I swear nothing was going on with us in class -"

"No, I know," I said quickly, forcing a smile as I tried to edge towards the parking lot. "I know Adam's just an idiot."

"He is," she laughed. "I mean, I just wanted to make sure we're okay. I know you like Jonathan -"

What?! Did she seriously know?! Was she just speculating? How did that get out? Was I being obvious? Oh god, abort! Abort!

"Oh, that's Barb," I lied with a nervous laugh, waving my hand in the general direction of the cars. "I gotta go, Nance. I'll see you tomorrow!"

"Ally -"

I was already across the front lawn of the school. I booked it to Barb's car and leaned myself against it, waiting nervously for my best friend to appear. She finally emerged, almost five minutes later, looking at me curiously.

"Is everything -"

"Did you tell Nancy I like Jonathan?" I asked in a hushed voice as we got in. She looked surprised.

"What? Of course not, Ally. I know that was between you and me -"

"I mean I know you two were just teasing me about him before, but then just now she apologized to me about History class because she said she knows I like him -"

"And I'm sure you kept a calm and careless composure, instead of blushing and running away, right?" I opened my mouth to argue, except that was exactly what I'd done. I snapped it shut and looked down at my lap sheepishly. Barb laughed and leaned down to meet my eyes. "I *told* you that you two flirt. And I know I'm not the only one that's noticed, you know."

"I know," I mumbled. I hated when she was right. Barb just shook her head and gave me an amused smile as she drove us back home. She pulled into my driveway and we sat in the car for almost half an hour, gossiping about Nancy and Steve - *were they actually a thing, or...* - and discussing the finer points of the awful cafeteria food.

We probably would have stayed there a lot longer, had we not seen

Dustin riding up to us. I had to interrogate him about Will, so I gathered my things and gave my best friend a hug goodbye.

"I think Friday we should go down to the burger shack for lunch," she decided as I leaned back down into the car. We grinned at one another; going out to eat wasn't something we did often, but when we needed a pick-me-up...

"It's a date," I promised her, and she smirked at me.

"I won't make Jonathan jealous, will I?"

My entire face burst into a blush as I flipped her off.

"Get out of my driveway," I half-threatened, trying to hide my smile. She gave me a wink and I watched her drive away as Dustin came up beside me.

Except he didn't stop beside me, he kept going. I turned and stared at my brother in surprise; he never came home without saying hi to me. I followed him into the garage, and saw him starting to dig through our boxes of dad's camping gear.

"Dustin?" he didn't pause, so I came up beside him and tried again. "Hey, Dustin."

He gave me a fleeting glance, and my heart dropped. He looked upset, more than I'd seen him in a while. I would bet anything that Will wasn't at school today. I gave him a gentle smile and motioned for the house.

"How about we go inside and I'll make us chocolate chip pancakes for dinner?"

He shook his head as he pulled out a pair of old binoculars and a heavy duty flashlight.

"We're gonna go look for Will. He never came home last night, so he's probably just lost in the woods. So we're -"

"You're not going anywhere," a voice said from behind us. Dustin and I whirled and stared up at Chief Hopper in alarm. I put a hand over

my chest and tried to catch my breath as Dustin literally dropped everything and sprinted inside. I looked between Hopper and my brother in confusion.

"Am I missing something?"

"Yeah. The part where I already told all the kids *not* to go out and get in the way," he growled, watching me as I picked my way out of the garage and pulled the door down. "Good thing I showed up."

"I'll make sure he stays in," I promised, casting a glance towards our living room window. The curtains fluttered as Dustin dropped back out of sight. "Thanks for coming to check on him."

"Yeah," he said gruffly, and then the two of us fell into silence. Hopper had been one of my dad's closest friends in Hawkins, and in turn he'd been close to Dustin and I. And since the accident... "How, uh, how's your mom?"

"Oh, she's good," I lied; this wasn't the time to start going into the long backstory he hadn't been around for. "Y'know, busy hanging out with the cat."

Hopper cracked half a smile, but I could tell there was something else on his mind. I waited for him to gather his thoughts. He and my dad had been a lot alike in that sense; when something was wrong, it took them a few moments to figure out how to approach it.

He took a breath, and then settled a questioning gaze on me.

"Your brother brought something up to me earlier, when I was at the school."

My whole body froze.

He hadn't, had he? I told him not to worry about it. I told him I'd handle it. Please tell me.... I realized I hadn't replied so I did my best to look curious instead of terrified as I squeaked out,

"Oh?"

He studied me for another several long moments, like he could see

into my soul. I tried not to shift nervously and hold his gaze. When I was close to breaking my poker face, he added slowly,

"Said something about issues at home. With Don."

"Did he?" I forced out, words like sandpaper sticking in my throat. Hopper took a step towards me and I felt like melting into a puddle of terror and sliding down the driveway. I couldn't tell him. He was friends with Don. And if he came up to Don like he'd just come up to me...

"You're Robert's kid," he said quietly, giving me what actually seemed like a fatherly look. The most we'd gotten out of him since dad's accident and losing his daughter had been gruff, aggressive exchanges. "So if somethin's goin' on, Ally -"

"I-I mean, we had an argument last week," I filled in quickly, trying to keep my composure. "He'd lost his new calculator and thought Dustin took it."

"Nothing else?" he pressed, and I opened my mouth to tell him *no*. Nothing came out. I slowly closed it and forced myself to shake my head. Hopper looked extremely unconvinced, and extremely frustrated. "I can't help you if you don't talk to me, kid."

I pointedly didn't say anything. Raw fear was pulsing through me. If he confronted Don, he'd easily talk his way out of anything I said, and the second he got back home... no. Because it wouldn't be *me* suffering. It'd be Dustin. And I wasn't going to take that risk with my baby brother on the line.

Hopper let out a heavy sigh but nodded, knowing he wouldn't get any farther with me. He scrubbed a hand down his face and gave me a final parting look.

"You kids need anything, you come find me, okay?"

"Yes sir," I said, offering a small smile. He hesitated for a second, like he wanted to reach out and pull me into a hug, like he'd done all those years ago. But instead he just gave me a gentle squeeze on the shoulder and headed back down the driveway.

I took several moments in the driveway, trying to compose myself. I wanted to be mad at Dustin; I really did. He'd come close to not only getting me in trouble, but getting *himself* in trouble with Don. Thank god he hadn't been home for that. If Hopper had talked to him...

But he'd done it out of love. I knew that. He was worried, and I hadn't been hiding my fear of Don well enough. I'd have to work on that, and I couldn't lash out at him for trying to help. So instead I'd focus on the fact he'd just tried to sneak out and look for Will.

I heard his footsteps retreating down the hall as I opened the door. I trekked to his room and found the door shut, so I leaned on the wall and gave a few knocks.

"Can I come in?"

There was a moment of silence, and then I heard the lock click open. Dustin dropped onto his bed and kept his head down as I slid the door open and came in.

"I'm not mad about Hopper," I said gently, coming to sit next to him. Dustin didn't move, like he didn't believe me. "Really. I know why you told him. And I'm sorry I haven't done a better job at handling him -"

"You shouldn't need to." He lifted his head up to frown at me, fire burning in his eyes. "He shouldn't be hurting you. Or yelling at us. Or using mom like he is -"

"I know, kiddo. And I told you, I'll handle it. I promise. But right now I don't want to risk doing anything that could get any of us hurt. Okay?"

Dustin pressed his lips together, not pleased, but gave a terse nod. I hoped that meant I wouldn't have any more awkward talks with the Chief.

"So I'm not in trouble?" he asked hopefully. I settled an unamused scowl on him.

"Oh, you're in trouble." His eyes widened, confused. "Hopper tells you and the boys *not* to look for Will, and that's the first thing you go and

try to do?"

"If he's lost -"

"Which is one of many scenarios," I cut in, shaking my head. "Then Hop will find him. What if something bad happened to him? You'd be going to the same spot, unprotected."

Dustin didn't answer; I'd made my point. He was a worrier, and I knew to play off that when I had to.

"For now I want you home right after school, okay? Just till we know a little more." When he went to argue I shook my head. "Non-negotiable. I can't lose you, kiddo. You're a pain in my ass," he looked surprised, I never cussed. "But you're all I've got. So don't go doing anything stupid, okay?"

Dustin deliberated for a heartbeat, and then pulled me into a tight hug. He buried his face in my shoulder as I hugged him back, and we sat like that for a few moments.

"I love you, Dust-pan," I mumbled into his curls as I pressed a kiss into the top of his head; I felt him smile.

"I love you too, Ally-gator."

I snorted and pushed him off of me, making him laugh.

"You know I hate that!"

"What, and I like being called a common house cleaning accessory? At least you're a vicious predator!"

I shoved him off the bed as I hopped up. He shouted after me as I skirted down the hall, calling after me,

"Do your homework you cleaning accessory!"

I spent the night finishing up my homework and getting dinner ready. My mind kept going back to Jonathan and Will. If Hopper was involved... man, it had to be serious. Was he home yet? Was he okay? What about Jonathan, and Joyce?

As I got the noodles boiling, I grabbed the phone and dialed their number, hoping to reach one of them. But instead the answering machine picked up.

Must be out looking, I realized, hanging up before I could leave a message. I'd try later tonight, just to see.

Dinner was quiet, Dustin and I opted to eat in the living room with mom and Mews. Which meant half the time I was yelling at the cat to leave the plates alone, and the other half was yelling at Dustin to put his juice on the coffee table, not the carpet.

By the time we finished and cleaned up, I was more than ready for sleep. As Dustin showered, I tried the Byers one last time. Instead of ringing, I got a busy signal. With a sigh, I hung up and decided to leave them be for the night.

After my shower, I peeked into Dustin's room. He was lying on his stomach, resting his chin on his pillow, staring at his walkie-talkie. My heart ached for him. Will was one of his best, closest friends. He had to be worried sick about him. I knew how bad he wanted to go look for him, but I was glad he was at least listening to me.

"Hey, kiddo. You goin' to bed?" He glanced up at me and nodded solemnly. I came over and sat next to him, gently rubbing his back. "You okay?"

"Yeah," he sighed, and turned his head to look up at me. "Just thinking about Will."

"I know you are, but don't worry. Will's a tough cookie. You know that. I know Hopper will find him safe, and then you and the others can kick his butt for scaring you." Dustin cracked half a smile and I leaned down to kiss his temple.

"Night Ally," he said sleepily. I smiled at him as I paused in his doorway.

"Night kiddo."

I snapped off his light and slid his door shut, finally retiring to my room. Just as I laid down, I shot right back up.

Jonathan and I had to turn in our project tomorrow, and we still needed to add the final touches. We should have finished it all today, but I'd been sidetracked without him there... I jumped out of bed and grabbed the poster from my closet, laying it out.

I'd finish this for the both of us, and make sure we passed. One less thing for him to worry about right now. It was only half past nine, anyways. I had plenty of time. I started fixing up our poster, and by the time I glued the last paragraph it was just coming upon 11 o'clock.

I breathed out a sigh of relief; our project was done. There was a bittersweet feeling in my chest as I rolled it up and put it on my desk. As fun as it'd been, now I didn't have an excuse to hang out with Jonathan every day.

Hopefully I won't need an excuse, I thought to myself, getting up to get some water. I took a few long drinks in the kitchen and then headed for bed. As I paused at my door, I reached over and slid Dustin's open instead, just to check.

I saw his blankets piled in the bed, and I almost turned away to go to sleep. Until I saw his window open. Dustin was weird, I mean we all knew that. But he had a thing about sleeping with open windows. Bugs crawling in, robbers, bears... So why was it wide open?

Heart racing, I snapped on his light and only got a few steps in when I had my answer.

Dustin was gone.

Canon is here! Thanks so much for giving me the time to build a little backstory for Ally, I know it took a few chapters, but what are your thoughts? Like how she's mixing in so far? From here on out we're with canon, so let me know if we need to add/remove anything as we go!

As well, I got a question about which actress I would match to Ally. I based her looks off Alyssa Milano (in the 1980's, of course!) for those curious!

Hope you all love this chapter!

6. The Weirdo on Maple Street

My little brother was gone, just hours after I'd tucked him into bed. I was losing my mind with worry, and I had no idea what to do. There was always the chance he'd snuck out, but what if something else had happened?

What if Will had been kidnapped, and the same person came and snatched Dustin too? It was pouring rain out, what if my baby brother was lying in some ditch left for dead, cold and lifeless? God, I was gonna throw up. I was pacing his room, tears running down my face, trying to keep myself calm so I could think.

Calling the police was out of the picture. If he'd gone with the others to go get Will, and Hopper found him, we'd need a parent or guardian to come get him. Mom wouldn't be coherent enough to help, and if we had to call Don...

Nope. Not risking it. But what if he'd been taken? I'd heard something before that kidnapped victims are most likely to be found within the first 72 hours. If that was true, I was wasting time pacing his room.

I had no idea what to do.

Almost half an hour passed with me frantically pacing the room, and twice I nearly broke down and went to call Hopper. He'd kill me for using his direct number at midnight, but if I just called *him* maybe we wouldn't need to tell Don?

I had just turned for the hall when I heard the bushes rustle outside. A moment later I caught the sound of bike wheels turning. I stood stone-still in the middle of Dustin's room, holding my breath. Sure enough, a second later I saw a head of curls poke up into view, followed by two guilt-filled blue eyes.

"Uh... hey?" Dustin tried, easing himself into his room. I couldn't even speak I was so furious. "Look, I know you said to stay inside -"

"Do you have *any* idea," I said lowly, enunciating every word as I tried to keep from screaming, "what hell you just put me through?"

"I didn't mean to," he said quickly, coming towards me with his hands held out to keep me at bay. "We just wanted to -"

"I know *exactly* what you wanted to do," I cut in viciously, taking a step for him. "Did you ignore everything I said earlier? Did you somehow forget Hopper told you to *stay inside*? Do you have any comprehension of all the bad things that could have *just* happened to you?!"

"Ally, we just went -" he paused as he looked up at me. "Are you crying?"

"Yes, I'm crying! You scared the absolute shit out of me, you little asshole!" I shouted, making him jump in surprise. "All I could think of was getting a call telling me they found your stupid body in a stupid ditch -"

I cut off with an angry sob and tried to calm myself down as I buried my face in my hands. Dustin's arms - alarmingly wet and cold - wrapped around my waist and he pulled me into a hug. I bent down and held him tight.

"I'm sorry Ally," he said solemnly into my shoulder. "I didn't mean to scare you like that. I just kept thinking about Will being all alone, and he's probably scared. I just wanted to help him. He's my best friend."

"I know, I know," I sniffed as I pulled back from him. I knew how bad I'd feel if Barb was missing; I would have done the same thing as he did. It didn't make his actions any less stupid or dangerous, but... I took a deep breath to try and push my anger and lingering worry to the back of my head. Now that the furious red tint had cleared from my vision, I noticed just how soaking wet he was. "I'll kick your butt for this in the morning. But right now let's get you dried off."

He nodded and followed me obediently into the bathroom. I grabbed a few fresh towels and helped him get down to his underwear, then wrapped him up tight. He dried off completely as I brought him some fresh clothes, and I gave him a few moments to dress while I rung out his other attire.

When I came back inside - now freezing myself - I found him waiting in the kitchen. He still looked guilty, but both of us were too tired to say anything else; it was just past one in the morning.

I herded my brother into his bed and tucked the covers in, shutting and locking his window. As I gave him a kiss on the forehead and stood up, I gave him a stern look.

"I want your butt in this bed until I come and wake you up. Am I clear?"

"Yeah, I won't leave," he promised sleepily. I gave a stern nod before shutting off the light and shutting his door. I collapsed on my own bed, exhausted. The emotions and adrenaline had all worn off, and I was thoroughly drained.

He'd be getting chewed out tomorrow as soon as I got the chance, but as mad as I was, relief overwhelmed everything.

Relief that my little brother came back.

My heart ached for Joyce and Jonathan. To not have Will come home... as I fell asleep, I promised myself I'd do whatever I could to make sure they got to see Will again.

Tuesday, November 8th

7:30 came a lot earlier than I wanted it to. It was a struggle to get myself out of bed, but hauling Dustin out? He groaned and buried deeper into his blankets. I stood over him - tired and grumpy - about to upend his mattress.

"It's your own fault you're so tired," I reminded, ripping the blankets off and throwing them to the ground. He made a noise of annoyance and tried to inch down and grab them without actually getting up. "Dustin. Up and dressed in five or you're grounded."

I still had to get mom up, and I was just as sleepy as my brat of a brother, so he didn't get any leeway. After getting her meds and ushering her and Mews to the living room, I looked around and saw a lack of brother.

Stifling a sigh, I focused on breakfast instead. And when he wasn't out by the time eggs and toast were on the table, I'd had it.

He was back asleep, back under his covers snoring peacefully. Okay, that was it.

I grabbed his glass of water off his desk, pulled the covers back and then threw the water into his face.

He screamed and jolted awake, scrambling to look up at me in absolute perplexity.

"What the hell was that?!"

"Your wake up call," I snapped, jamming finger at his closet. "Dressed, *now*. You don't get to be late today."

He let out a whine, but didn't go to lay back down (probably because his sheets were soaked). "But I'm so ti -"

I gave him my most dangerous look.

"If you even start complaining about being tired, Dustin, I swear to god -"

"Okay, Okay!"

"If I have to come back in here *one more time* -"

"I'm getting dressed!" He all but squeaked, scrambling up off his bed. I gave him a last warning look before heading back out.

On instinct, I checked outside for Will. Our driveway was empty, and it was well past the time he would have been here. My heart twisted a little more.

When Dustin finally emerged, I ushered him away from the table, just giving him a few pieces of toast.

"Had you gotten up when I told you, you could've had a full meal," I said pointedly, getting a grumpy look from him over his shoulder. "Get to school. I expect you home right after, okay?"

"But I wanted to -"

"I don't care. I wanted you in bed last night and you couldn't do that, so now you're home as soon as you're out of school."

"*Fine*," he huffed, stomping out of the house like a six year old. I rolled my eyes and went to gather my project and other school work. Just a few minutes later, Barb pulled into the driveway. I gave mom a kiss on the cheek and then hurried out to meet her.

"You look exhausted," she said sympathetically as I dropped into the car. I nodded wearily and launched into a recap of my night. She sighed heavily and shrugged as I finally finished it out.

"I get why he went out to look," she sympathized. I started to argue when she added in, "if you or Nancy went missing, I'd do the same thing. But you're right, it was dangerous."

"It was. Especially considering Chief Hopper came by after you left yesterday and said he'd already told the kids not to go out."

"Ooh, strike two for Dustin," she sighed as we pulled into the parking lot. I nodded as we got out, and walked with her towards school.

"Yep. He also, uh," I lowered my voice, and leaned a little closer. "He told Hopper about Don."

"What, really?" I nodded and she pulled me aside before we walked in. "Did you tell him?"

My eyes dropped.

"I couldn't. I just kept thinking, what if he confronted Don and Don talked his way out? It wouldn't be me, it'd be *Dustin* getting the backlash. I can't risk it."

Barb knew how to read me; somehow, even though I was trying to hide it, she knew how upset I was I hadn't told Hop. She pulled me into a tight hug and I clung to her until the warning bell rang.

"It's okay," she promised as I fought the urge to cry. "Because I think I've got a solution to the Don problem."

"W-what?" I sniffed, pulling back to look up at her. "Really?"

"Yes," she promised. "He's out of town, right? I can come by tonight and we'll talk about it, okay?"

I gave my best friend one more tight hug and nodded eagerly. It felt like finally a huge, Don-sized weight was being lifted off my shoulders. Maybe soon I could just be a kid again.

Jonathan wasn't in class again today.

Barb caught me staring at his empty desk, *again*, and nudged my foot across the aisle. I glanced over at her and couldn't hide the worry on my face. Worry for Will, worry for Jonathan and Joyce, worry (in the back of my head) that Dustin would just run off after school. Or get kidnapped. Or lost. Or who knows what.

With the projects turned in, we were busy doing presentations, which meant I couldn't talk to her like I wanted to. I was going crazy with my paranoia again, and having Jonathan gone just reminded me how real this all was. By the end of class, I was a jittery mess.

Nancy was walking ahead of us with Steve, but Barb hung back and said gently,

"We can go over to his house tonight and check on him, okay?"

"Yes please," I said quietly, trying to settle myself. My mood for the day only worsened when we came around the corner and found Nancy talking to Carol and Tommy. Barb and I exchanged irritable looks as we came up to the crowd.

"Can they come too?" Nancy asked, glancing back at us. After a quick glance at each other, Carol and Tommy both shrugged. Carol turned her sharp eyes on me and smirked.

"I mean, if they're up for a party, sure."

Steve turned to Nancy.

"Are *you* in, at least?" when she looked back at Barb and I, unsure,

Steve added to us, "it'll be lowkey. Just us. C'mon, what d'you say?"

Nancy went to answer just as Carol looked past our group.

"Oh, god. Look."

The six of us turned at her words, and my heart dropped. Jonathan was at the announcement board, pulling out what looked like a poster of Will. A *'missing' poster* I realized as Steve muttered,

"Oh god. That's depressing."

I turned and leveled a glare on him; seriously, his brother was missing! Come on, cut the guy some slack! Carol and Tommy were smirking with one another, watching him struggle to pin the poster up.

"Should... should we say something?" Nancy tried, looking uneasily at me. So, in other words, *Ally this is on you*. I turned my glare onto her and she pressed her lips together.

"I don't think he speaks," Carol sneered, looking at the rest of us, waiting for our laughter. Barb handled the glaring this time as I snapped,

"Shut up. Just leave him alone you guys."

Tommy's smirk just grew and he settled his gaze on me.

"How much you wanna bet he killed him?"

Nancy and Steve both at least managed to look uncomfortable as Barb smacked him hard across the chest for me. My blood was boiling; no way was I going to the party, and no way was I staying here any longer.

"I'm serious, shut the hell up," I snapped at them, glaring as I began to back towards Jonathan. Carol made a smart remark to Tommy and the two of them laughed. Nancy and Steve continued to stare at the ground and avoid my glare as I caught Barb's eye and said,

"I'll see you at lunch."

When she nodded - and gave me an understanding smile - I turned and hurried towards Jonathan. He didn't look up initially, busy trying to fix the poster to the board. His hands were shaking so much he couldn't get the pins in. I reached out and gently rested a hand on his arm, and his head snapped up.

"Hey," I said gently, giving him a smile. His lips flicked up briefly, but his expression didn't change. I could see the exhaustion and sadness etched into his features, and it made my heart break even more. "Can I help?"

He let me take the poster, and then sat the pins in my open hand. He shifted back just a bit and stepped up between him and the board to secure the poster. I smoothed it down and smiled, glancing back at Jonathan.

"I like these pictures of him."

"Me too," he said in a quiet voice, and actually gave the smallest of smiles.

"Look, if you need anything, I'm here to help," I offered, turning to face him. We were closer than I'd expected, but neither of us moved away.

"I really appreciate that," he said as the bell rang. When he didn't make to go to class, I lingered too.

"Do you have more posters? I can help you hang them up."

"I can't let you miss class," he declined, taking a step back. I moved after him; I wanted to help. I wanted to find Will and give Jonathan the relief I'd had when Dustin came home.

"It's fine, I'm ahead in it anyways."

"I've got something I need to do," he deflected again. When I went to ask about it, he reached into his bag and handed me a bunch of posters. "But if you could pass these out, it'd really help."

"Yeah, of course," I promised quickly, jumping at the chance to help him. He gave another small smile and turned to walk out to his car.

Just do it Ally, I commanded myself, and before I could chicken out I said quickly,

"Hey, Jonathan."

He paused and turned back to me, and I closed the distance between us and pulled him into a hug. He hesitated for a heartbeat, but then folded himself around me and held me tight to him. His face buried into the crook of my shoulder, and I felt him let out a long breath, like he was relaxing for just a heartbeat. At least I could give him that.

When we pulled apart, I smiled up at him.

"Just something for the road."

He actually chuckled and cracked a wider smile than before as he backed down the hallway.

"Thank you, Allison."

I watched Jonathan leave and held the posters a little tighter, wanting nothing more than to run after him and make sure he'd be okay.

By the time the last bell rang, I'd passed out and hung up all but a few flyers. The rest I was saving to plaster all over my neighborhood. It wasn't much, but it was *something*. And I wasn't done yet.

Barb met me by my locker, and as I put my stuff away, I explained to her,

"I'm just gonna go down to his house, make myself useful. I'm sure Joyce is a mess right now, and I bet Jonathan could use some moral support, you know?"

"I think they'd both really appreciate that," Barb agreed, walking with me to her car. "Any little bit will help them right now."

I nodded, and then added,

"Do you want to come down there with me?"

She gave a heavy sigh and dropped into her seat, giving me an apologetic look.

"I know I said I would... but Nancy wouldn't leave me alone about that party. So I've got to go get ready and then help *her* get ready."

I made a face as we headed down the street. Nancy hadn't mentioned anything to me at all, not even during lunch. Did she not want me there? Not like I wanted to go, but *still*.

"You're really gonna go? You know it's just gonna be her and Steve making out, and Carol and Tommy having sex on every available surface."

"I know," she sighed, shaking her head as she pulled into my driveway. "But Nancy needs the support. I don't want her going there alone. And besides, it's just one night."

"Yeah, I know. I just don't want *you* going either," I told her, giving a small smile. "How about I go with you? So when the couples split up, you're not all alone."

"No way," she shot down; I gave her a look of surprise. "Jonathan and his mom need you more right now. We're just gonna go for a few hours, and I'll drag her back home."

I gave my best friend a smile and leaned over to hug her. She chuckled and hugged me back, then gently pushed me out of the car. I leaned back in the window as I shut the door and said,

"I'll see you tomorrow. Be safe, okay?"

"I will."

"Look both ways before you cross the street," I called as she pulled away. "Eat your vegetables! Wash behind your ears!"

"Yes mom!" she laughed, waving at me before she headed down the street. As I turned to go inside I nearly collided with Dustin. He was still on his bike, looking up at me moodily.

"You're weird," he informed me as I skirted around him and headed for the door.

"What, and you're not?"

"Not as weird as you are."

"Yeah, right. I've seen you spend three hours trying to flip a penny and get it in your belly button."

"That's called *science*, Ally," he argued, following me into the house.

"It's called being weird," I deflected, setting my backpack on the table and pulling out my homework. Dustin sat with me, and at least he didn't put up too much of a fuss while we worked. Afterwards, though, as soon as he shut his book, he looked up at me.

"Can I *please* go to Mike's?"

I opened my mouth to argue, but realized that if I wanted to go to Jonathan's, my best bet was to have him stay with someone I trusted. If I left him home alone, I had a feeling he'd just end up at Mike's anyways...

"Yes," I started, and snagged his elbow before he could take off. "Only because I have some things I need to do. And you're staying there until I get back. Okay?"

He huffed again.

"I can't guarantee our ship of curiosity won't need to leave port."

"Unless you want to spend next weekend with me cleaning the house, you'll keep that ship docked. You got it?"

He rolled his eyes, but muttered a *yes*. I herded him outside and grabbed his old bike, hopping on and leading the way to Mike's. When we got there, though, I rode up the driveway with him. Dustin gave me a questioning look, but I just pointed to the front step and followed him up the walk.

Mrs. Wheeler answered the door and gave us a welcoming smile.

"Dustin, Ally! It's great to see you two. Come in, Mike and the boys are downstairs, and Nancy is in her room -"

"Oh, no, I won't be able to stay," I apologized, giving her a smile as I all but shoved Dustin inside. "I've actually got a few errands to run, and I was hoping Dustin might be able to stay here for a couple hours."

"Of course, sweetheart! That'll be no trouble at all." I gave Dustin a last look to behave and listen to me before looking back up at Mrs. Wheeler. "Are you sure you don't want to say hi to Nancy?"

"I wish I could, but I've got to get to the post office before they close," I excused, slowly inching back off the porch. "But I really appreciate you watching Dustin. I'll be back in a few hours."

Before she could say anything else I rushed back for my bike. I hopped on, and rode as fast as I could down to the Byers. When I made it down their driveway, though, the only car I saw was Joyce's. Jonathan said he'd had something to do... was he still off doing it?

When I knocked on the door, I heard a flurry from inside and a second later the door was wrenched open. It took Joyce a moment to realize who was standing on her porch. I gave her a gentle smile and she gave me a shaky one.

"Oh, Ally. I-I'm sorry, I was expecting Hopper."

"It's alright. I'm sorry too. I didn't mean to drop in unexpectedly -"

"No, no. Please. Come in, come in," she urged, moving aside and letting me in. I scanned the room as she shut and locked the door. I saw a pile of Will's pictures on the coffee table, and her armchair had been scooted over to sit by the kitchen wall.

"How are you holding up?" I asked when she came back to my side. The two of us sat on her couch and she turned to me, tears in her eyes.

"I'm not. I just... I feel so guilty," she confessed. "Jonathan and I both worked late. If I had been home -"

"You can't blame yourself," I said gently, shaking my head. "You were providing for your family. You had to be at work, and so did Jonathan."

Joyce nodded, more to herself than anything, and took a deep breath. She lifted her eyes to me, like she was debating letting me in on something. I waited patiently as she gathered up her words.

"Last night... I swear that Will called me," she almost whispered. "It had to be him. I'd know his breathing anywhere."

"What?" I asked surprised, heart leaping at the thought. "Did he say anything? Is he okay?"

"He didn't talk. But I *know* it was him," she insisted, looking up at me desperately. And, okay, maybe it wasn't the best idea to buy into something that sounded as crazy as this, but the look on her face... she just needed some support.

"I mean, you'd know your own son when you heard him," I said slowly, and she nodded vigorously.

"*Exactly!* And - and then the phone, it just burnt out! I had to buy a whole new one! It's like... like Will was trying to reach out to me! I know it! I know Will is alive, and I know he's trying to come home!"

She searched my eyes for any kind of confirmation. She didn't want to feel as crazy as she sounded. And after losing my dad, I knew how much it meant to have just a sliver of hope that they'd be back.

"He is," I agreed softly; I saw the surprise flicker over her face. I was sure Hopper - and possibly Jonathan - weren't buying into her theories, and to have someone on her side... I could see how much it meant to her.

"You really think so?"

"I do," I promised with a nod. "Will is a smart, resourceful kid. Whatever situation he's in right now, I *know* he'll be able to get out of it. I just know it."

Joyce surged forward and threw her arms around my neck, hugging

me tight as she let out a sob. Instinctively, I wrapped my arms around her and held her to me, running my hands up and down her back as I tried to soothe her.

For just a few moments, I was back two years ago, in my *own* living room, holding my mom. I had nothing to say, nothing to offer, but I knew sometimes the pain was so overwhelming all you could manage to do was cry and hug someone, and that was okay.

After a few minutes, Joyce sniffed and sat back, wiping the tears off her cheeks. She gave me a watery smile and rested her hands on my shoulders affectionately.

"You're so wonderful, you know that? Thank you so much, Ally."

"Of course," I assured, resting one of my hands on her own. "Before I go, let me make you something to eat. I'm sure you haven't had anything all day."

She opened her mouth to correct me, but let it slowly close as she gave me a sheepish look. I was right. I stood and rested *my* hand on her shoulder briefly, and then made my way to the kitchen.

It was nothing fancy, just a few grilled cheese sandwiches, but she ate them like they were a five-course meal. I left her to her dinner, slipping down the hall towards Jonathan's room. His room door was open just a crack; I eased it further, just enough for some light to spill in.

Dark and empty; he really wasn't here. It was nearing 8 o'clock, where could he still be off to? Part of me wondered if he'd gone off looking for Will on his own. That wouldn't surprise me. I knew he wouldn't stop looking until -

A light flickered on in Will's room.

My train of thought came to a stop as I stared at the light shining out from underneath his door. I could still hear Joyce in the kitchen, so who...?

I rushed across the hall and shoved the door open, looking around for either Will or Jonathan. The room was empty, but the light on Will's

bedside table was still on. I stared at it, perplexed, trying to understand how it had just come on.

"Will?" I tried softly, moving towards the closed closet door. The closer I got, the more the hairs on the back of my neck stood up. Something felt off; I reached my hand for the closet door handle, and the light flickered. My hand froze.

Come on, Ally! Just open it! Nothing's gonna happen! I tried to convince myself, taking another half-step closer. My hand was shaking now, as was the rest of me. I inched a little closer, took a breath, and grabbed the handle.

I ripped the closet door open, and was met with a row of clothes. I let out a nervous laugh, letting myself relax as I turned to leave.

A tall, faceless man was standing just outside the window. The fear that burst through me was so powerful I couldn't move. Couldn't breath. All I could do was stare at the thing in pure horror. As if it felt my gaze, the thing outside turned its head towards me, and the light snapped off. A scream ripped out of my throat as I scrambled back and fell onto Will's bed. The light flickered on just as Joyce burst into the room.

"Ally? What's going on?!"

The thing was gone! What?! It'd just been right there! What the hell was it? Where had it just gone!? Was I just losing my mind -

"Allison!" I snapped out of my panic and stared up at Joyce, speechless and shaken to the core. "What happened? Are you okay?"

"I-I'm fine," I managed, getting shakily to my feet as I tried to compose myself. "I just - I saw a light on in here, and I was curious, so I came to check - it was nothing. I just - the light flickered, it scared me, and I just - I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't be in here -"

I couldn't control my nervous babbling, and I could see the worry on Joyce's face as I skirted around her for the door.

"Sweetheart, are you - "

"I've gotta go," I managed, forcing a smile (that probably looked more like a grimace) as I stumbled for her front door. She followed me with a bewildered gaze, like she wanted to help me but had no idea how. "Dustin's at the Wheelers, I gotta, uh, I gotta go get him. It was nice seeing you!"

"Allison, what's going -"

I did a quick glance around the outside of the house, but didn't see any tall, faceless man. As I grabbed my bike off the ground, I didn't see any weird footprints around the porch. Nothing to indicate the thing I'd see had been real.

Was I seriously losing my mind?

Joyce watched me nervously from her front porch as I got onto the bike and headed up the driveway. I gave her a quick wave, and then took off down the street. I tried to shake the uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Had it just been a trick of the light? Was I just worked up and seeing things? I had to be. Faceless, giant creatures weren't real. I couldn't have seen it. So I made myself try to forget that incident as I pulled up to the Wheelers.

Mr. Wheeler answered the door this time, not even looking up from his paper as he stepped aside to let me in. I skirted through the living room and waved at Mrs. Wheeler as I opened the basement door.

"Dustin! Time to go!"

I heard a flurry of commotion and startled, hushed whispering. There was a bit of scuffling, but no mop of curly hair came up the stairs. With a sigh, I started down into the basement. A heartbeat later, Dustin came skidding around the base of the stairs and came rushing up towards me.

"I'm coming, I'm coming!"

"Jeeze, where's the fire?" I asked as he ushered me back up the steps. "Hey, stop! You're gonna make me fall!"

"Then keep moving," he suggested; I glared at my little brother as he herded me back into the hall. He shut the door and then leaned against it, giving me a nervous smile when I lifted a brow at him.

"Okay, what's going on?"

"What? Nothing. At all. I just thought you wanted to leave. So let's leave."

"You really expect me to believe that?"

"What, that you wanna leave? Yeah. I mean, you're the one who said '*time to go*', so..."

"Okay, weirdo. Come on. I'll interrogate you at the house."

As the two of us made for the front door, Mrs. Wheeler leaned out of the kitchen and beckoned me. Dustin went outside as I stepped over to talk to her.

"Are Dustin's spasms a common thing?"

"His *what*?"

"At dinner, he had a spasm," she whispered to me, as if Dustin had sonic hearing. "It just seemed like something he didn't really talk about. I wanted to make sure you knew about it."

"Thanks," I said slowly, giving a confused smile. Okay, Dustin didn't have '*spasms*'. And how weird he'd been getting me out of the basement? Yeah, something was up. Dustin was waiting anxiously for me to come out. The second he saw me, he jumped onto his bike and started rolling down the driveway.

"So," I called to him as I caught up down the street. "Spasms?"

"I just, uh, got this chill and I kinda, y'know, shivered."

I gave him a deadpan look as we turned onto our street.

"You're really going with that?"

"Yep," he told me as we pulled up to the garage. I let out a sigh, but knew he wouldn't give anything away if I kept pushing. So I let him scurry inside as I shut our bikes in the garage. I'd figure him out, sooner or later.

Dustin and I took turns showering, and he even waited up for me as I finished up and put mom to bed. The nights without Don here were easy and quiet. I wished, more than anything, that we could have this all the time.

I hugged my baby brother goodnight and walked him to his room, ruffling his hair as I pushed him in ahead of me. As he crawled under the covers, I tucked him in and gave him a stern look.

"I swear, if I come in here to check on you and you're gone -"

"I'm not leaving," he promised quietly. "I mean it."

I gave a solemn nod and leaned down to kiss him goodnight.

"Good. And whatever it is that you're up to -" his eyes widened ever so slightly, "just remember you can always come to me if you need anything. Okay?"

"Okay. I will."

"Get some sleep, kiddo. I'll see you tomorrow."

He mumbled a goodnight as I slid his door shut. I hesitated outside his room, part of me wanting to slip back inside and watch him all night. I mean, I *knew* he wouldn't sneak out again. I hoped. But what if someone tried to sneak *in*?

I had to shake those thoughts off. If I kept up like this, I'd never sleep again. I made myself go to my room and lay down, hoping to get at least a few hours of sleep. As I rolled over and shut my eyes, the image of the faceless monster creature came back to my mind.

I wished Barb had come with me to the Byers house. Maybe if she'd been there, I wouldn't have freaked myself out. She would've known how to interrogate my little brother. I wanted to call her, hell, I'd want her to come over if she could. She was probably still at the party

with Nancy, and I didn't want to risk getting her in trouble. I'd have to wait until tomorrow.

For now, I was stuck with my oddly frightening imagination. That monster-looking thing had been pretty terrifying. I wasn't as freaked out now, thinking back, because I *knew* it wasn't real. Couldn't be. But as I began to drift off, a quiet, curious part of my mind couldn't help but wonder, why had I seen it then? Why had it been watching me, outside Will's room?

What if it was real?

What if... what if it had been what had taken Will?

Don't start going crazy, Ally, I thought groggily, drifting into sleep. Monsters aren't real.

Thanks for being so patient, guys! I had a family emergency crop up and had to step away for a bit. Updates may be a little slower because of this, but they're still coming!

I really hope you like the chapter! It's so fun adding Ally into the Stranger Things world, I hope I'm doing a decent job of blending her in!

As always, let me know what you think! I love hearing from you guys!

7. Holly, Jolly

Thick, cold shadows swarmed around me. I felt lost, terrified. Sinking in a world I didn't recognize. I couldn't see the faceless monster, but I could hear him. Crying out as it hunted me. Stalked me. I stumbled forward, trying to get my bearings.

I was in a forest somewhere. The trees and ground looked like they were rotting, covered in spider webs and decayed well past their time. I didn't know where to go, but I knew I had to leave. The longer I stayed here, the longer that creature had to find me and kill me.

As I came around a grouping of trees, my heart nearly stopped. Barb was just a few feet ahead of me! Oh my god, I was saved! Barb would know what to do! She always did. She always got me out of whatever trouble I'd fallen into before.

"Barb!" I called, reaching out to her as I tried to run. It was as if I was stuck underwater. I could barely move, and my voice sounded muffled and far off. She didn't turn. I struggled ahead, shouting her name over and over as I tried to get to her.

My fingers brushed her shoulder, and finally, she turned around.

Her face was as decayed as the world around us.

I jolted upright in bed and nearly fell to the ground. My heart was racing and I was covered in a cold sweat. My dream was already fading, pushed aside by the adrenaline racing through me, but fragments lingered in my mind.

Barb's cold, dead eyes staring down at me. The bone-jarring shriek of the faceless monster... I shuddered and tried to push both things out of my thoughts as I took a few calming breaths.

As I finally got up out of bed, I heard rustling coming from the kitchen. It was just past six thirty in the morning. No one else would be up this early... Had Don come home already? Heart in my throat - again - I opened my door and slowly crept down the hallway. I leaned around the corner to look into the kitchen and actually

stopped in surprise.

Dustin was up on the counter, rifling through our cupboards and tossing down whatever he could grab. First a bag of our Nilla wafers, then the rest of our peanuts, a whole can of pringles... He grabbed his Pez dispenser off the bottom shelf, then hopped down and turned to grab his backpack.

He froze when he saw me, eyes going wide as I slowly crossed my arms.

"Whatcha doin'?" I asked, getting the biggest shit-eating, toothless grin I'd ever seen.

"Oh... uh, I'm really hungry. Like, super hungry."

"For smarties and trail mix?" I asked, coming forward to start rifling through his backpack. He snatched it off the table and took a step back.

"My appetite cannot be satisfied."

"Not by that stuff it can't," I agreed, coming around the table. He danced out of my reach and started backing for the front door. "Dustin, come on. I don't want you wasting all our food and getting a sugar high -"

"You and I can have a serious discussion about my poor diet choices when I get home," he hedged, opening the door. What?! Where was he going?!

"You don't need to leave for another hour! What are you -"

"My curiosity voyage sets sail when it wants, I can't control its departures!"

"Yes you can!" I called after him as he pulled his bike out of the garage in record time. "Dustin! Get back here!"

"I love you too!" he shouted as he took off out of our driveway. I let out a heavy sigh and pinched the bridge of my nose. I wasn't chasing my brother down the street in my pajamas. Not again. He was up to

something, but I knew better than to try and catch him now. I'd just confront him later and catch him off-guard.

I spent the morning waking mom up, getting us breakfast, and even getting a headstart on reading some chapters coming up. Okay, so maybe Dustin was right when he called me a nerd. Sue me, I liked my history knowledge.

When I looked up from my book it was nearly 7:40. Barb was probably already here! Had I missed hearing her horn? I packed up my book and kissed mom goodbye before racing out onto the porch. Our driveway was empty.

Maybe she slept in from the party, I reasoned, sitting down on our step and hugging my knees to my chest, shivering as the cold November breeze cut through my sweater. I waited, and I waited. And still, more waiting. When I couldn't feel my fingers anymore, I finally relented and ducked inside to check the time. It was five till eight!

Where the heck was Barb?! I thought about calling her house, but I didn't want to waste time. I'd have to ride Dustin's old bike to school if I didn't want to be late. I pedaled as fast as I could down the street, shivering by the time I'd even left our neighborhood. I really needed to invest in some heavier sweaters. Or, y'know, actually dig my coat out of our hall closet.

As I rounded the last bend before I got to school, my mind went back to my dream. It was hazier now, but I could still see Barb's lifeless eyes staring at me. I shivered harder and forced the thought out of my mind. It was a stupid dream; I couldn't let it freak me out.

I barely pulled up to the bike stand as the warning bell rang, and I booked it to class. I was frozen and shivering, and probably more than a little askew, but I was here. Nancy looked up as I dropped into my seat, and she gave a frown.

"Why're you so late? And where's Barb?"

"She never showed up," I whispered, and didn't miss the flicker of concern that flitted over her face. "What time did you guys get back last night?"

"I didn't get home until midnight," she said, looking surprisingly embarrassed. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why. "But she left a few hours before. Like, ten o'clock I think."

"Do you know if she got home?" I asked; Nancy just shrugged as class began, not making me feel any better at all. The last time Barb had missed school was when she got the flu in ninth grade. She was as much of a nerd as I was.

I spent all of class worrying about all the different scenarios running through my head, every so often going back to the shadowy fragments of the dream I could barely recall. When the bell finally rang at the end of the period I was so antsy I actually jumped.

Nancy gave me a look as I raced to catch up with her.

"Are you okay? You look a little freaked out."

"I'm worried about Barb," I told her, and again saw the concern shimmer in her eyes before she looked away. "You know this isn't like her."

"Yeah, I know, but -" she cut off abruptly as she saw Steve waiting for her at her locker. "We'll talk at lunch, okay?"

"Nanc, hang on -"

Too late; she was already halfway down the hall. I swallowed my frustration, but knew that I wouldn't get anywhere with her as long as Steve was within eyesight. So I trudged to History and sat moodily in my seat as the rest of the class slowly trickled in.

Every few moments I'd check the room, looking to see if Barb had walked in. I was just waiting for those red curls to peak around the corner and settle all the unease welling inside me.

When I looked up just as the final bell rang, I actually gasped. Jonathan was in his seat. He was back in class! Why didn't I notice sooner?! I wanted to talk to him as badly as I wanted to see Barb. And now I'd have to wait and become an even more chaotic bundle of nerves!

Nancy slunk into class with Steve, looking flushed and giddy. *Glad you're having a good day*, I thought irritably as she and her not-boyfriend got into their seats. Barb's stayed painfully empty all class period.

It was no surprise when Nancy and Steve took off as soon as the bell rang, but I didn't care. My sights were set on Jonathan right now anyways. I skittered around the other kids and had to nearly sprint to catch him as he hightailed it down the hall.

"Hey! Jonathan!" I gasped, stopping him just before he disappeared into the photography lab. His hand paused on the door handle and he glanced at me in surprise.

"Oh, uh, hey Allison."

He didn't even manage a smile, and my heart ached for him.

"How're you doing? I went by to check on you last night -"

"Yeah. My mom told me," he said dismissively; I swallowed down the rest of my sentence in surprise. What the heck? Had I gone back in time and come across the Jonathan I'd first talked to when we got our project?

"Okay. Well, I just wanted to see if you were okay. If there's anything you need help with -"

"I just have to develop some pictures," he said in a clipped tone, nodding at the door he was about to open. "I can handle it."

"Well, I meant like with Will, or your mom. But I could help you with your pictures -"

"I can handle it, Allison." It looked like Jonathan heard the tone of his voice, because he dropped his gaze and added quickly, "thanks, though."

"Yeah, sure," I said softly, taking a step back. "You know you can come to me if you need anything."

Jonathan just nodded and disappeared into the photography room.

My aching heart sunk just a little further down. I didn't have Barb, Nancy was about as supportive and helpful as a dead tree, and now it seemed I didn't have Jonathan either. *Fanfreakintastic.*

The rest of the day trudged on. Nancy's promise to talk at lunch panned out just like I'd expected - she ran off with Steve, Carol, and Tommy without a second glance back at me. Like she'd be much help anyways. I didn't see Jonathan the rest of the day, which was probably for the best.

He's just under a lot of stress, I reminded myself as I shoved my things in my locker after school. Will's still missing and his mom's a wreck right now. Go easy on him, Ally.

Instead of focusing on Jonathan's attitude, I'd work on finding Barb. It was gonna be tricky though, without a car. Realistically, I could only bike so far before I had to be home for Dustin and my mom. So I'd start by calling her house, save myself a trip there if she was home safe. I hurried out to the pay phone and shoved the quarters in, then dialed Barb's number.

"Come on, come on, pick up Barb..." I muttered under my breath as the phone rang. I sucked in a gasp as the line picked up, only to deflate when Mrs. Holland spoke.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Holland. It's, uh, it's Ally."

"Oh! Ally, hi! How're you doing?"

"Oh, good. I'm good." I paused for a moment, trying to think of what to say. I knew Barb hadn't told her parents about the party, so I didn't want to get her in trouble. But why would I be calling in the middle of a school day?

"Ally? Are you there?" Mrs. Holland pressed; I blurted quickly,

"Y-yeah, I am. I was just wondering... is uh, is Barb there?"

"No... She's at school. With you, isn't she?"

So Barb wasn't home, and she wasn't here. Where the hell was my best friend? Wait - what did I say to Mrs. Holland?

"Oh, yeah, she just - I couldn't find her at lunch. So I thought maybe she, uh, maybe she went home?"

"No, sweetheart, I'm sorry. She isn't here. In fact, I haven't seen her since she went to Will Byers vigil with you and Nancy."

My heart dropped.

"She... she didn't come home last night?"

"No, Ally. She told me she was staying the night with you and Nancy." I could feel her suspicion through the phone. "She *did* stay with you two, didn't she?"

"Oh, yeah. Yeah. She did. I just, uh, I got my days mixed up. I'm sorry, I think I'm getting sick."

Smooth, Ally.

"Alright, sweetheart," she said slowly. "You just get some rest tonight. Take some vitamins."

"Will do. Thanks, Mrs. Holland. I'll see you later!"

I hung up the phone before I could dig myself into a deeper hole. Sheesh, I was *not* good with secret interrogations. Maybe I wouldn't try to grill Dustin when he got home; clearly, it wasn't my specialty.

"Did you get ahold of Barb?"

Surprised, I turned around and saw Nancy walking up to me. Without Steve near her, she actually looked like she was concerned. *Not the time to be petty*, I chastised myself as I shook my head.

"No, just her mom. She said Barb never came home last night."

"What? Really?"

"Yeah. Did she say she was gonna go anywhere after?"

"No, she just said she was going home," Nancy started, and then her eyes flicked over my shoulder. Her face scrunched up and she sighed. I glanced back and immediately felt myself tense up. Carol, Tommy, Nicole, and Steve were crowding around Jonathan, who looked more than a little uneasy.

"This can't be good," I muttered to Nancy, turning and hurrying across the parking lot towards them.

"Wait, Ally, don't get involved!"

Like hell I wouldn't.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Jonathan said quickly as I came into earshot, trying to brush past the others and get to his car. Tommy grabbed his bag and ripped it off his shoulder; Jonathan spun to grab it back, but it got tossed to Steve.

"Guys, leave him alone," I said sharply, ducking around Jonathan as he froze to stare at them. Steve gave me a look as I held my hand out for Jonathan's bag. "Seriously. This isn't cool."

"Believe me, Ally. In a few moments you're gonna be glad we did this."

"Stop," Jonathan said in a desperate voice; when I glanced back at him to be reassuring, he refused to meet my eyes. He looked almost sick with worry. When I glanced back at Steve, he was pulling a handful of photos out of the bag.

"Oh here we go," Steve said, throwing a glance at Jonathan before flipping through the pictures. Carol and Tommy crowded around to look as Nicole glared at Jonathan.

"Just put them back and leave him alone," I tried again, moving to grab the photos. Tommy, taking a few for himself, stepped up and shoved my shoulder back; I stumbled and felt a hand come to the small of my back. Jonathan stepped up beside me as he steadied me.

"This isn't what it looks like," he tried, only to be laughed into silence by the others.

"Yeah, this isn't creepy at all," Carol sneered, waving a picture at him; I snatched it before she could pull back.

"Allison, wait," Jonathan said quickly, grabbing my elbow.

"Take a look, see for yourself," Steve said coolly; my eyes dropped to the picture. It was a shot of Steve, Tommy, Carol, and Nancy gathered around a pool, obviously taken without them knowing. My thoughts came skidding to a stop as I stared at it. Was... was this the party last night?

When I lifted my confused gaze to Jonathan, he stared at me with guilt-filled eyes. Why the *hell* had he been taking secret pictures of everyone last night?

"I was looking for my brother," he said to me, gauging the look on my face. Steve stepped up beside me and said sharply,

"No. No, this is called *stalking*."

Jonathan didn't look at them, instead he kept his eyes on me. Silently asking me to... to *what*? Take his side on this? I didn't even know what *this* was. Was he stalking them? Or was he just stalking...

Nancy, finally deciding not to just stand by, came up to the group and looked around.

"What's going on?" she asked slowly; I didn't miss the way Jonathan's head snapped to look at her instead. My heart fell into my stomach.

"Oh *there's* the starrng lady," Tommy smirked, making Jonathan shift uncomfortably and cast a side-glance at me before looking back at Nancy.

"What?"

"This creep was spying on us last night," Carol sneered; I couldn't help the look I threw her. She met my eyes, and a smirk curled over her face. "He was probably gonna save *this* one for later."

She offered Nancy a picture, and she took it. Her eyes swept over it, and her mouth opened in surprise as she looked up at Jonathan.

Steve nudged me in her direction.

"See for yourself."

Jonathan didn't move to stop me as I leaned over; Nancy held the picture up and my entire breath left me. It was a picture of Nancy in one of the rooms of the house, taking her shirt off.

I couldn't even look at Jonathan.

Byers is totally crushing on Nancy, Adam had said just the other day. Barb had convinced me it was nothing, but this? This wasn't nothing. This wasn't Jonathan looking for Will. This was Jonathan secretly taking a picture of Nancy undressing.

This is why he didn't want to help him in the photo room, I realized, feeling sick to my stomach. He was developing these pictures and hadn't wanted me to find out. I'd been thinking all day today that I'd just feel better if I knew why Jonathan was acting so weird earlier, but it'd just made me feel even worse.

Jonathan finally tore his eyes off Nancy and looked at me, then immediately dropped his eyes to the ground. He was ashamed, and part of me was glad about that. Being upset over Will didn't excuse things like this.

This was, like, the worst time ever for Barb to not be here.

"See, you can tell that he knows it was wrong, but that's the thing about perverts," Steve said slowly, walking up to Jonathan as he ripped up the pictures he was holding. Tommy and Carol, holding the rest, did the same. "So... you just have to take away his toy."

Jonathan's eyes widened in alarm as Steve turned and went towards Jonathan's bag.

"No, please, not the camera -" he said desperately, moving to go after him. Tommy stepped up and shoved him back. Okay, I was hurt and angry, but I wasn't heartless. I knew Jonathan's camera had cost a lot, and I knew he and his mom didn't have a lot of money.

I turned and ducked under Steve's arm and grabbed Jonathan's bag,

clutching it to my chest and backing away from him. Tommy abandoned his attempt to hold Jonathan back and turned to me.

"You think what he did is okay?"

"No," I said sharply. "But neither is this. You guys made your point, you don't have to go this far."

"Y'know, kissing up to him isn't gonna make him like *you* more than Nancy," Carol threw out, making the others around her laugh. At the look on my face, she laughed and added, "yeah, Nancy told us all about your little crush."

What?!

My head whipped around to stare incredulously at my 'friend'. She looked almost as guilty as Jonathan now. Tommy capitalized on my distraction and shot forward, grabbing my upper arm and pulling my hold on the bag loose so Steve could snatch it from me.

His fingers dug into an old bruise and a burst of pain shot through my arm. An involuntary squeak left me as I tried to pull out of his painful grip. Jonathan was at my side a second later.

"Let go of her," he snapped, grabbing Tommy's wrist and twisting his arm back, breaking his hold. Tommy sneered at him as Jonathan put his arm out and moved me back from the others.

In going after Tommy, Jonathan didn't have time to stop Steve as he pulled his camera from the bag. He turned it over in his hands as I said quickly,

"Steve, c'mon. Don't be a dick."

His eyes flicked to me and he met my gaze for several seconds, before giving a simple shrug and turned to Jonathan.

"Yeah, sure. Here man."

He held out the camera; Jonathan reached to take it, and Steve let it fall through his fingers. It shattered on the ground and I felt Jonathan's heart fall with it. He stared down at it in disbelief as the

others dropped the ripped pieces.

"Some friend *you* are," Carol threw out at me as they headed back towards school for the football game. "Defending this pervert. You probably told him where she'd be."

"C'mon Nance," Steve said coolly, wrapping his arm around her and tugging her back. "You don't need to be around these creeps."

I glared after them all, fury at Nancy reaching its peak. It was clear we were only friends when Barb was with us. I'd deal with her and her inability to keep secrets later, though. For now, I turned and knelt beside Jonathan as he gently gathered his camera pieces.

"Here," I said softly, grabbing a few beside me and holding them out. Jonathan paused, but didn't take them from me.

"You don't need to help," was all he said as he scooped up the ripped pictures. I put the pieces of his camera by his side and instead went to gathering the scraps before they got the chance to blow around the parking lot.

My hands stilled on the first piece I went for. Barb was sitting on a diving board, feet hanging into a pool, looking down at her hands. My heart leapt seeing her. Jonathan had seen her at the party! Did he know where she went?

"Jonathan, did you -"

"Look, I know. It was super creepy of me."

"No, that wasn't - well, yes. It was. But that's not what -"

"I gotta get home," he said briskly, standing abruptly and skirting around me for his car. I stood and stared after him. No *thank you* for sticking up for him? No apology for the pictures? I mean, we weren't dating. I didn't exactly have a right to be jealous... But we'd almost kissed, and now he was sneaking pictures of my friend? Well, not really my *friend*. But that didn't mean -

I snapped out of my thoughts as Jonathan started his car. He pulled away without a second look at me. I stood in the parking lot a few

moments longer, staring after his car as I clutched the piece of the picture I'd kept.

One thing was certain. After what'd just happened, I *needed* to find my best friend, and that was exactly what I was gonna do.

The ride to Steve's house was a lot longer on a bike instead of in a car. Mom, dad, Dustin, and I had come here a few times when I was younger for the summer barbecues the Harrington's threw.

Seeing his house empty and quiet was almost unnerving in itself. I rode my bike around to the side street, and my breath left me. Barb's VW was parked along the road. I hopped off the bike and let it fall as I rushed up to it, wanting nothing more than to see her inside.

The car was empty.

I dropped my head against the window and let out a shaking breath. If her car was here, and she wasn't with it... Please, universe. I couldn't stand it if I lost my best friend. I couldn't lose Barb.

"Ally."

My head snapped up and I spun around so fast I fell back against the car.

"Barb!?" I took off towards Steve's backyard, so relieved I felt sick. She was here! She was here! I knew his parents were out of town, so I didn't worry as I threw open their back gate, ready to see my best friend waiting.

There was no one.

The pool sat eerily still, and the trees lining the back of the house stood tall and unmoving, watching me. I crept forward slowly, eyes flickering around the property.

"Barb?" I tried again, coming up to the diving board Barb was sitting on in the picture. I knelt slowly at the edge of the pool, and steeled myself. If I found her at the bottom... I took a breath and leaned over.

The only thing in the water was my own reflection. For the first time today, I was glad I didn't see Barb. As I blew out a breath, I saw something shift over my shoulder in my reflection. Instantly I looked back, but nothing was behind me. What the...

I turned to the water again and found myself inches from the faceless monster. I let out a scream and threw myself back from the pool, scrambling away as I hyperventilated. What the hell was going -

"Ally!"

Barb! My head whipped around on instinct and I looked desperately for my best friend. The yard behind me was empty. What the hell!? Her voice had come from behind me, I knew it!

My mind thought desperately, *earth to Ally! Crazy monster in the pool!* and I turned back around as quickly as before. There was nothing in front of me, but in the distance I saw a faceless, sinewy body slip into the trees.

Okay. What the *hell*. What was going on?! What was that thing!? And why did I keep hearing Barb! *What was going on!*?

I didn't waste time lying around. I was on my feet and out of the backyard before my heart started beating again. I made it to my bike in record time and pedaled home as fast as my body would let me.

I almost wiped out skidding into my driveway; I dropped the bike and sprinted inside, mind racing. I had no idea what I'd just seen, but I knew now this wasn't a coincidence. The faceless man - it *had* to be a mask! - at Will's, and now at the last place Barb had been?

I had dialed the police station before I knew what I was doing.

"So, let me get this straight," Officer Callahan monotoned, flipping through his notepad as Officer Powell stared at me, *just* this side of bemused. "You're saying man in some faceless mask took the Byers kid and Ms. Holland?"

"I mean, I don't know for sure, but - are you *laughing* at me?" I asked incredulously, sitting back in the armchair as Officer Callahan

sniggered into his uniform. He sobered up quickly as Officer Powell cut in,

"It's just a little weird, kid. Okay? You think you're bein' stalked by some weird, mask-wearing serial kidnapper?"

"Why can't I talk to Hop again?" I snapped; Officer Callahan gave me an exasperated look.

"Because the Chief's out handlin' some other stuff right now."

"Whatever," I muttered, not entirely believing them. "Are you gonna file the missing person's report or not?" Officer Callahan tapped his notepad as they got to their feet and headed for the front door.

"Yeah, yeah. We'll talk to the people at the party. But uh, you see this faceless man again, Ally -"

"Thanks, yeah, I got it," I huffed, shutting the door after them as they giggled to their car. Seriously, Hopper aside, we had some pretty useless officers in this town. I let out a heavy groan and dropped onto the couch, face in my hand. Talk about a day from hell.

Dustin still wasn't home, mom had just slept through the evening, and now the Hawkins Police Department thought I was insane. On top of Barb missing, the faceless monster reappearing, and Jonathan stalking Nancy, who couldn't keep her mouth shut and had told all my least-favorite people I had a crush on said stalker.

I needed a few good hits over the head with a baseball bat at this point. I heaved a sigh and shoved to my feet, knowing my night wasn't over yet. I still had a missing 12-year-old to hunt down.

Mrs. Sinclair hadn't seen the boys all evening, Mr. Wheeler told me to quit calling during the game, and the Byers' line was just virtually busy at this point. I was deciding whether to start combing the neighborhood on the bike or calling the police department *again* when I heard the front door open.

"You know, this is the second time in two nights I've almost filed a missing report on you," I started as Dustin came into the living room. "It's almost ten o'clock, you know that, don't you?"

When he didn't answer me, my verbal assault stumbled just a bit.

"Hey. Dustin."

He slowly turned to me. Tears were streaming down his cheeks, eyes shining bright with an aching sadness that took the breath out of me. Something was very, very wrong. The scolding could wait. The moment I opened my arms he rushed into them, clinging tight as he buried his face into my shirt and sobbed.

Dustin's legs were shaking so bad he could barely stand. I only managed to guide him a few steps before we both dropped to the living room floor. He curled tighter into my hold. I only caught a few words - *Will* and *body*. It was all I needed.

I cried with my baby brother as I felt Will's loss tear through me. Such a sweet, loving little boy didn't deserve to be gone so early. Poor Will... oh god, Jonathan and Joyce... I couldn't imagine. Losing dad had been the hardest, most devastating moment of my life. But to lose a child, a brother?

Dustin and I didn't leave each other the rest of the night. I managed to coax him up onto the couch, and we stayed curled up with each other as we sobbed. It was just past 1AM as I felt Dustin - still sniffing - shift to look up at me.

When I met his grief-stricken eyes, I felt my own tears start up again.

"You think dad's with Will?" he whispered; I gave him a small smile and nodded.

"Yeah, I bet he is. They'll take care of each other."

Another few quiet, aching moments passed. I thought Dustin had fallen asleep until I heard him murmur to himself,

"I should've taken care of him."

My already shattered heart broke just a little more. Whether he'd meant Will or dad... I hugged my baby brother close as we finally drifted off to sleep. The last thing that crossed my mind was a silent plea to the universe.

I can't lose anyone else. Please just let Barb be okay.

Happy new years everyone!

Thanks for being so understanding! Things are finally setting down and I've been able to catch up on writing! I hope you liked this chapter - I think this was my favorite one so far! I'm so excited to hear what you guys think! A new chapter will be out soon, not as long of a wait this time I promise!

*So, I've gotten a lot of messages and feedback regarding Barb... right now, some of you want me to go off script, some of you want me to stick to canon... I've made a quick (1 question) survey to get some feedback! If you'd like to take this survey, please find this story on either Archive of Our Own or Mibba (still named More Than a Feeling) and find the link at the end of the chapter in the notes. If you're unable to find it this way, message me your reply and I'll count it towards the survey. **if you haven't finished watching Stranger Things Season 1, don't take the survey, it contains a spoiler!*

8. The Body

Thursday, November 10th

Tires crunched on the gravel in our driveway, pulling me out of my fitful nap. I hadn't slept on the couch in years and now I knew why. My whole body was stiff and sore, and I was absolutely freezing despite having Dustin laying almost entirely on top of me.

I heard a door shut, and my heart fluttered with excitement. Barb?! Was she here to pick me up for school? Maybe I'd slept in! I struggled to sit up, stuck by the tangle of my brother's limbs in mine. With a sigh, I carefully picked his arms and legs off me, pushed him back onto the cushions, and finally sat upright.

After wiping his drool off my arm, I stood up and hurried to the front door to peek out of our window. My breath caught painfully in my throat; Don was walking towards the house.

"Dustin!" I hissed, scrambling back to the couch and shaking him. He woke with a start and looked around wildly. "Don's home! Get your stuff and go to Mike's!"

I had no idea what time it was, but if he was out of the house Don couldn't hurt him. I tugged him up and shoved him down the hall as I heard keys in the lock. Panic set in deep; I hadn't cleaned anything up from the night before, too focused on Dustin and Barb to worry about dishes.

There was no time to do anything. I stood, rooted to the carpet with fear as the door swung open. Don took two steps inside, and instantly a scowl settled over his face.

"You gotta be shittin' me."

I couldn't speak. I didn't move as he threw his briefcase to the ground and shoved past me into the kitchen. I heard dishes clanking on the table, heard him curse under his breath, and then a plate shattered behind me.

"*You gotta be shittin' me!*" he roared; I couldn't help flinching down into myself as another plate shattered. I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and saw Dustin peeking out, ready to leave. I motioned for him to wait a sec, and I took a breath.

Do it for Dustin, I told myself, shoving my fear down as I turned around to face Don.

"I'm sorry," I said quietly, hiding the tremor in my voice. I carefully picked my way into the kitchen - over the plate shards - and positioned myself so Don had his back to the hall.

A moment later, I saw Dustin creeping past us.

"I'm gone for a couple days and you can't fucking handle that?"

"One of Dustin's friends -"

"I don't give a damn about your bullshit excuses! When I tell you I want this house spotless, I mean *I want this goddamn house spotless!*" he snarled, and took a step towards me. Dustin, at the door, paused and looked back. I shifted my eyes quickly to hold Don's furious stare and waved Dustin off discreetly.

When I didn't answer, Don took a step back and started to turn around. I knew better than to argue with him, but if he saw Dustin sneaking out... I had to hold his attention.

"I wasn't making excuses," I said, voice quiet but strong. Don stopped turning instantly and his head snapped back around to look at me. "Dustin's best friend was found dead and we weren't thinking about housework."

I risked a glance and saw the door click shut. Dustin was out. He was safe -

Don's hands locked like vices around my upper arms and hauled me back, slamming me into the fridge. A cry of pain left me involuntarily and one of his hands came up to slap me hard across the face.

I forced my whimpers back down and held perfectly still as he knelt to get in my face. His hand came back to my other arm, and he

squeezed harder. Tears came to my eyes and I willed myself not to make a sound.

"Look at me." I slowly lifted my gaze up to his. He leaned even closer as he said slowly, "you *ever* talk back to me again, you'll be the next kid to be found dead. Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir," I whispered. Before I could brace myself Don threw me aside. I stumbled and fell into the table, slumping to the ground.

"I want this shit cleaned up by the time I get home tonight."

With that he stepped over me, grabbed his briefcase, and disappeared down the hall into mom's room. The second the door slammed I shoved to my feet. There was a deep ache in my ribs where I'd hit the table, and my arms hurt like hell, but I was okay. More importantly, Dustin was okay.

I scurried down the hall and slipped into my room, shutting the door silently as I took a few calming breaths to try and slow the fear and misery coursing through me.

You're okay. Dusty's okay. It's okay, I chanted to myself as I got dressed. *Don't cry. Just don't cry. Don't let him hear you break.*

Thankfully, the old bruises on my neck and jaw were all but faded and my sweater would cover everything else that had just happened. The moment I was decent, I opened my door just enough to poke my head through.

The door to mom's room was still shut; I grabbed my backpack and scampered back down the hall. The dishes could wait. Right now I needed a few moments for myself. Snagging my school bag, I slipped out the front door, eased it closed as quietly as I could, and then took off.

I didn't stop running until I hit the old railroad tracks that wound through the forest. I followed them a few yards north to make sure I couldn't be seen from the main road, and I finally let myself rest.

A sob racked through me and I dropped to the ground, slumping back against a tree and tucking my legs to my chest as I buried my face in

my knees. I cried from the pain, from the frustration. The fear and the hatred that welled in me from Don. I cried for my mom, for my dad. God, I missed my dad. I cried for my baby brother mixed up in this great big pile of shit.

I cried for Will. For Jonathan and Joyce, and *oh god* I cried for Barb. My best friend. No, she was more than that. She'd been the other half of me since I was thirteen and having her gone - wherever the hell she was - hurt even worse than everything else together. Because she *fixed* all the other crap that went wrong. And without her...

God, I had to stop myself. If I kept dwelling on all the shit falling apart around me, I'd fall apart too. And that couldn't happen. For an immeasurable amount of time I stayed curled in on myself as I let my crying die down. Once the sobbing had reduced to sniffles, I got to my feet and took a deep, slow breath. For just a moment, I buried my face in my hands and shut my eyes tight like I did when I was little.

"There you go, Ally cat," dad said, rubbing my back gently. I peeked out from my hands to see him smiling down at me. "It's all okay. You're okay. Can you say it with me? I'm okay."

"I'm okay," I whispered; his smile grew warmer as he said it with me again.

"I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm okay."

"I'm okay," I whispered, lifting my head up and letting out a shaking breath. Dad wasn't at my side. I wasn't on the couch with him, safe and warm and away from all this pain and sadness.

I was having a breakdown in the middle of the forest, making myself late for school. I let out a heavy sigh, then took a deep breath and started my trek back to the main road. At this rate I'd just have to walk to school and accept my fate. I was never tardy so hopefully I wouldn't get in too much trouble this time.

As I got to the edge of the forest, I heard the sound of bikes peddling and voices in the distance. I stayed hidden in the trees and watched as Dustin and Lucas rode past me heading *away* from school.

"I don't know! Mike just said we had to get there *now*," Lucas argued to my little brother as they zoomed around the corner.

So first he was sneaking out at night, then he raided our cupboards and left an hour early, and now he was skipping school? I hiked my backpack up onto my shoulders, wiped the last of the tears off my cheeks, and headed after the boys.

School could wait. I had a mystery to solve.

By the time I got to the Wheeler's, it was just past nine and the cars were gone from their driveway. I circled around the back of the house and narrowed my eyes at the bikes lying by the basement door.

Were they all skipping school because of Will? Dustin and I hadn't gotten to talk this morning, but he had to have been broken up. And Lucas and Mike... Well, I'd check up on them and make sure they were all okay.

And then I can be the cool big sister when I don't bust any of them, I added, feeling pretty good about my plan. I raised my hand to knock and cut off hearing Lucas argue,

"They pulled Will's body out of the water! He's dead!"

"Well maybe it's his ghost," Dustin reasoned. *"Maybe he's haunting us!"*

Wait, what?

"It's not his ghost!"

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know! All I know is Will is alive. Will is alive! We just have to find him!"

Okay, what the hell was going on?! Was this denial? Were they really thinking Will was still alive? Enough eavesdropping; I knocked on the door and the talking stopped instantly.

"Dustin? Lucas? Mike?" I called; I heard the boys scrambling. "You're

not in trouble. I promise. I just wanted to make sure you're alright -"

"Don't! She can't know about -"

"No, this is good! We need an adult! This is out of control!"

"She's not an adult, she's my sister!"

"Guys! She can hear us!"

There was a moment of silence; I sighed and agreed,

"I can. Just open the door. Whatever you need an adult for, I can -"

A moment later the door was wrenched open. Lucas stared up at me in relief for a heartbeat before Dustin tackled him aside.

"Okay, look," Mike said, angling himself in the crack of the door; I could see Dustin and Lucas wrestling with each other over his shoulder. What the hell was going on?! Mike had on the most serious expression I'd ever seen from him; he stared up at me for a moment and then said slowly, "we could sort of use your help. But if you agree to help us, you can't say a word to *anyone*."

"Not mom, or Nancy, or Jonathan," Dustin huffed, letting Lucas go but keeping him back. "Or Mike's parents. Or Lucas's parents. Or Hopper. Or -"

"Okay, okay," I cut in, holding my hands up; anything to figure out what was going on to make sure they were alright. "I won't tell anyone."

The boys shared a long look, and Mike leaned back around the door to look inside. After another tense heartbeat he turned to look at me and ask solemnly,

"Promise?"

I looked at all the boys and gave a nod.

"Promise."

Mike took a breath and stepped back, opening up the basement door. Dustin took my hand and pulled me inside, leading me towards a table with blankets strewn over it. As I came around the front of it, I froze.

A young, terrified girl was staring up at me with big doe eyes, huddled into herself and the blankets she was nested in. She met my alarmed stare for a heartbeat and then dropped her gaze, shuffling down further into the blankets and clutching Mike's talkie to her chest.

"This is Eleven. El for short," Mike said as he came up to us. He knelt down next to the girl - El - and gave her a reassuring smile. "El, this is Dustin's big sister Ally, short for Allison."

El glanced at Mike, and then looked back up to me. What the actual hell was going on here?! Who was this kid? Why was she hiding out in Mike's basement? Why were the boys keeping me sworn to secrecy? Why were none of them broken up over Will? *What was going on?!*

Dustin tugged my hand, motioning for me to sit down. I slowly sank to my knees; El shifted back a hint when I was eye-level.

"It's okay, El. She won't hurt you. She promised not to tell anyone about you."

"Promise?" she asked in a quiet voice, looking straight at me. I blanched for a heartbeat and then nodded quickly.

"I-I promise," I managed, and then had to ask, "but can someone please explain why you think Will's alive?"

"It's... kind of a long story," Lucas eased, settling on the ground next to me as Dustin did the same on my other side. I shrugged and tucked my legs under myself, glancing around the circle of suspicious kids.

"Start talking, then. We've got plenty of time."

I had no idea who El was or what the boys were up to or *what the hell was going on* but they'd trusted me with their secret and I was here to help. The boys seemed to realize I was getting in on this because

instead of being defensive, they started talking.

"So..." I trailed, glancing down at El as I paced past her again. She watched me pass as I continued, "you have super powers. Like, shutting the door with your mind kinda powers."

El nodded.

"Kay. And because of that, there are bad men after you. And," I added, glancing at the boys, "we can't tell anyone because if we do, they'll find you. And we'll all..."

El mimed the gun again and I blew out a breath; my mind hadn't shut off since the moment she started talking. First, Will went missing. Then Barb went missing. Now, a strange, telekinetic girl was running from psycho murderers.

And that thing. That thing in Steve's pool – *the dream*. I still couldn't remember all of it, but I remembered the feeling. I remembered Barb's lifeless eyes; they hadn't left me, and I didn't think they ever would. This couldn't be coincidence -

The boys let out a chorus of groans and I paused my pacing to turn and frown at them.

"What?"

"You don't believe us," Mike accused, and I furrowed my brow, opening my mouth to argue. "I knew it. I knew we shouldn't have said anything. Your sister's gonna blab and get us all in trouble –"

"I said no, Lucas said yes!" Dustin argued. "Ally's like, the worst option we could have picked. She's got too much of a conscience to keep a secret –"

"Hey!" I cut in. "Guys –"

"Ally's not the problem. The problem is the freak sitting under the table –"

"Lucas," I chastised, giving El an apologetic glance before scowling at

them. "Guys."

"What do we do? We're in deep shit. Deep. Shit!"

"Guys!" All three of them cut off, turning to stare at me perplexed. "Would you listen to me? I'm not gonna say anything!"

"What?" Dustin asked, genuinely surprised. "You're like, the biggest narc on the planet –"

I rolled my eyes. "Thanks for that. If you'd listen to me, I could tell you that I actually believe you guys." The talkie clunked on the floor; I glanced down at El. She was staring at me just as surprised as the boys. "Am I not speaking English or something?"

"You believe us?" Mike asked slowly; I nodded. "You like. You really, *really* believe us?"

"I do. Look. My friend, Barb, she's missing too." They all exchanged slow looks. "She went to a party with Nancy the other night, and she never came home. That night I had a dream."

"About Barb?" Lucas asked; I nodded quickly. El leaned forward just a hint as I pressed on.

"I don't really remember it. I just... it was this terrible feeling. This sinking, scared feeling in the pit of my stomach. All I remember are her eyes staring at me. Lifeless. I went to Steve's yesterday, and I swear I heard her."

"Was she there?" Dustin asked, brow furrowed as he watched me nervously. All of them looked on-edge, which made me feel a little better. Finally, someone was actually listening to me about this. Granted, they were kids. But still!

"No," I said slowly. "But I kept hearing her. Calling my name, like she was scared. And I saw this... thing. In the pool. It – it didn't have a face."

All the kids shared wide-eyed looks, so I said quickly,

"I – I know it sounds ridiculous. And I would've thought it was my

imagination. But I saw the same thing at Will's house a few nights ago –"

"*What?!*" they all shrieked, jaws actually dropping. El and I both flinched, and we shared a look as Mike asked,

"What the hell happened at Will's house?!"

"Language," I warned; El sat up straighter and fixed me with an excited stare.

"English," she said, giving me a nod in support. I stifled a snort and shrugged.

"You're right. Anyways," I sighed, turning to the boys again. I went over my visit with Joyce, repeating the part about the faceless thing in the window twice. By the end, we were all slumped on ground around me in various states of shock and concern.

"This isn't good," Mike declared; I didn't argue. I felt a little crazy, agreeing with a handful of twelve-year-olds, but... well, shit. They were onto something. And it was the best lead I'd found for Barb yet.

"That settles it," Dustin said, clapping his hands together as he turned to El. "We need to try and get in touch with Will."

"You really think it was him that you heard earlier?" I asked them, crouching down as El began to fiddle with the talkie. She, Mike, and Dustin nodded, but Lucas seemed skeptical.

"It was hard to tell," he reasoned, giving the boys looks as they frowned. "It's all hard to believe. And I need more than crying to convince me this isn't just crazy."

"So what, seeing her shut a door *with her mind* isn't enough to convince you this is real?!" Dustin argued; Lucas scoffed.

"The freak shutting a door isn't the same as our dead friend coming back to life and crying on the walkie talkie!"

"Hey, be nice," I told him, frowning as I saw El's eyes drop again. The boys didn't acknowledge me. I gave up, sitting back and listening to

them go back and forth, watching El fiddle with the talkie as Mike tried to help. Finally, he slumped back and dropped his hands in his lap.

"This isn't gonna work," he cut in, thankfully silencing the other two. "We need to get El to a stronger radio."

I was at a loss, but of course the nerdy boys around me weren't. They all shared a knowing look as Dustin said excitedly,

"Mr. Clarke's Heathkit Ham Shack!"

"The what?" I asked; they ignored me as Mike nodded enthusiastically.

"The Heathkit's at school. There's no way we're gonna get the weirdo in there without anyone noticing," Lucas sighed, waving his hand in El's direction. "I mean, look at her!"

She dropped her eyes and I smacked his arm.

"Don't be a jerk," I chastised, and turned a smile towards El. "We'll get you dressed up and no one will be wiser."

She looked up in surprise as I stood and nodded towards the stairs.

"I'm sure we can find some of Nancy's old stuff somewhere. We'll get you disguised and then we can sneak into the school. Get to the AC club –"

"AV club," Dustin and Mike corrected; I rolled my eyes as I held out a hand to El. She looked up at me, smile slowly spreading, and took my hand.

"There," I said with a smile, sitting back on Nancy's bed and setting her lip-gloss aside. Mike studied my work; a soft, pink blush spread over his cheeks as he took in her new appearance. Oh, he was so crushing on her.

El blinked up at me as I got to my feet, then turned her eyes to Mike. They were staring at one another, both at a loss for words; I'd give

them a moment. I slipped into the hall and jogged down the steps, leaning around into the basement stairwell.

"You guys find anything yet?" My brother's mop of curls poked out from the bottom of the steps. Wordlessly, he held up what looked suspiciously like a Star Wars costume. I gave him a frown. "No."

"Beggars can't be choosers," he t'sked. I rolled my eyes as Lucas appeared at his side and held up an old pink dress.

"Much better," I said, giving Dustin a pointed look as Lucas smirked at him in victory. My brother held up a finger, disappearing for a few moments as Lucas jogged up the steps and handed me the dress. Dustin leaned back around to show me a blonde wig.

"Atta boy. C'mon, let's hurry."

He tossed me the wig and I hustled up the stairs, almost colliding with Mike as he came out of Nancy's room. I held up the disguise and he smiled, taking them and handing them back to El. Dustin and Lucas joined us as Nancy's door shut, and we waited as El got dressed. After a few minutes, the door open and El's head poked out.

"Ally." I came up to the door and she stepped back, holding up the wig with one hand, holding her dress in place with the other. With a smile, I slipped inside and shut the door.

"Turn around," I told her, and she obeyed instantly. I zipped up the dress for her, and then took the wig. She was – frustratingly – almost as tall as me. It wasn't a hard feat, with me being a whopping 5'0, but still.

"Sit on the bed," I told her, and she settled immediately, watching in Nancy's mirror as I fixed the wig onto her head. Once it was done, she got to her feet and slowly walked to her reflection. She ran her hand over the blonde locks and a smile came to her face. I walked up behind her, settled my hands on her shoulders, and gave a smile.

"It's fun to dress up," I said gently as she met my eyes. "But I think you looked just fine without all this."

She smiled a bit more as she studied herself again. I saw her brow

furrow, and she reached out to rest a hand on a picture taped to the mirror. It was an older one of Nancy and Barb; my heart twisted as I stared at my best friend. Her finger tapped Barb's face and my eyes widened just a bit.

"Barb," she declared, meeting my eyes again. I swallowed hard and gave a simple nod. El studied her a moment longer and smiled, pulling her hand away. "Pretty."

"Very pretty," I agreed, thankfully pushing the tears back. I reached forward and tapped her reflection as I added, "both of you."

We were both smiling as we headed out of Nancy's room. All three boys stared at her in astonishment, but Mike was the one that stopped breathing. He was transfixed.

"Wow," Dustin said, thankfully breaking the silence as I leaned against the doorframe, watching the kids. It was absolutely adorable. "She looks -"

"Pretty," Mike said, and his eyes widened when he realized what he'd let slip out. He saw the smirk on my face and backtracked, "good. You look pretty good."

Lucas and I shared a bemused look over Mike's head as he gave me a look to be quiet. As El studied herself in the mirror, I jerked my head towards the stairs.

"Ready?"

El, Dustin, Lucas, and Mike shared a last look, and then turned to me.

"Ready."

Mr. Clarke nudged my arm as the assembly came to a close, and I glanced up at him. In his hand were the keys to the AV room, that we'd found locked earlier. I took them with a smile as he turned to leave.

"I've got papers to grade, so I'll be here for the rest of the day. You and the kids take as much time as you need with the Heathkit."

"Thank you, Mr. Clarke," I told him with a genuine smile, stepping aside to let the kids pass. He'd been my science teacher when I first got to Hawkins, and I knew how much Dustin and the boys loved him. Even now, he was stepping up and taking care of them the best way he knew how. "Really. This will help them out more than you know."

"Anything else you all need, you just let me know. Take care, Allison," he said, and disappeared into the swarm of kids. Man, if I could ever find a way to get rid of Don, I was hooking mom up with Mr. Clarke ASAP.

I turned back towards the gym, expecting the kids to be at my side, and frowned when I saw they were missing. The frown deepened seeing Mike, El, Lucas, and Dustin standing in the center of a group of kids, facing off against two boys I didn't know.

This can't be good, I sighed, starting to pick my way towards them, struggling through the sea of endless middle-schoolers (some of which were actually freaking taller than me). As I was nearly there, I saw the unknown boys turning to leave. My kids looked upset; well, more accurately, Lucas and Dustin looked upset. Mike and El looked pissed.

Without warning, Mike surged forward and slammed his hands into the back of one of the boys, sending him to the ground. The kids gathered around – myself, Lucas, and Dustin included – all *ooh'd* as Mike balled his fists.

"You're dead, Wheeler!" the kid snarled as he got to his feet. I surged forward, trying to reach Mike before he did.

"Hey!" I shouted; no one even acknowledged me. Damn short legs!

"Dead!" he bellowed, and lunged to attack Mike. Just inches from him, though, the kid froze. I was so surprised I actually stopped, standing along with the other kids as we watched. On instinct I glanced back at my other kids; Lucas and Dustin were gaping, but El was focused. She was glaring at the kid, fists balled, eyes slowly narrowing. A trickle of blood ran from her nose. And then one of the kids beside me gasped,

"Dude! Troy peed himself!"

I couldn't help it, I started laughing. Dustin and Lucas were cackling behind Mike, who had turned to look at El. She gave a small smile as she wiped her nose, which confirmed what I'd thought. El seriously *did* have mind powers, and she'd just used them to make a kid pee himself.

Freaking awesome.

I caught sight of a teacher making his way towards the group. I rushed forward and snagged Mike's arm, motioning to El and the others.

"Let's go!" I hissed, holding up the keys. They all surged after me as I led the way out of the gym. I handed the keys to Mike, and ushered them all inside before following and shutting the door, locking it for good measure.

"Now what?" I asked them, leaning against the door as I watched the kids gather around what I assumed to be the Heathkit. Mike turned it on and gave me a glance, nodding to El.

"She'll find Will."

El closed her eyes, and the boys gathered closer. I took a step towards them, intrigued now.

"She's doing it! She's finding him!" Mike said excitedly as Dustin *woah'd* and gave me an excited grin.

"Calm down. She just closed her eyes -" Lucas began, and the lightbulb above us shattered. I jumped towards them as they all gasped. And slowly, noises came through the radio. Loud, heavy banging.

"What's that?" I whispered, hedging up to Dustin and leaning over El with them. The banging intensified, so loud it was echoing in the room. And then Will's scared, timid voice called out,

"Mom?"

"Oh my god," I breathed, hand coming up to my mouth as I stared at the radio in disbelief.

"No way," Lucas gasped; we shared a look of holy actual shit as Will's voice grew louder.

"Mom... please... Mom!"

The boys started shouting at the radio, like they expected Will to hear them. I nudged all of them and shook my head.

"I don't think this is two-way, guys. Listen! I think – I think he's talking to Joyce..."

"Mom, it's coming! It's... it's like home, but it's so dark... it's so dark and empty! And it's cold!"

We all stared at the radio, horrified and amazed, listening to Will. Just twelve hours ago they'd found his 'body', and now he was talking through a radio while a psychic little girl pulled in his signal.

The radio sparked, and immediately I tugged the boys back.

"That's not good -" I started, and another voice came through the radio.

"Ally?" My entire body ran cold and the breath left me instantly. That was Barb. Clear as day, that was my best friend's voice calling out on the radio. The boys looked back at me in shock as I gaped at the radio. *"Are you there, Ally?"*

"Barb!" I shouted, ignoring the fact that I knew this wasn't a two-way thing. "Barb, I'm here!"

"Ally -"

The Heathkit sparked again and flames burst around it. All of us jumped back; I grabbed the chair El was in and hauled her back from the table as Dustin scampered around me and grabbed the fire extinguisher.

As Dustin put the fire out, Mike and I knelt in front of El.

"Are you okay?" he asked her quickly; she blinked, but didn't respond. I gently cupped her face, patting her cheek.

"El? Can you move?"

She turned her gaze to me, but she was fading. Right on the verge of passing out. I could hear kids running and screaming in the halls as the fire alarm went off. Shit. I motioned to the boys as I hiked up my leggings.

"Get the door, get the door," I said quickly, and then wrapped my arms around El's waist. Thank God she was small. Bending with my knees, I maneuvered her upper body over my shoulder and then stood, holding her in an awkward fireman's carry. Dustin flung the door open while Lucas and Mike raced out of the room, checking the hall.

They motioned for me to follow; Dustin and I raced out of the AV room and all but sprinted down the hall, El bouncing on my shoulder as we made for the bikes. The boys got on and I sat El on her feet, helping her onto Mike's bike before jumping onto Dustin's.

My mind was racing faster than we were riding; I had to hold onto Dustin to keep myself steady as my head began to spin. I had no idea where, I had even less of an idea *how*, but Barb was alive. My best friend, wherever she was right now, she was alive.

Barb was alive.

Welcome back, y'all! It's been a wild 18 months and I want to apologize for not posting this sooner. I've actually been waiting for S3 to come out. As most of you know there's a lot of debate surrounding Barb (and I appreciate all the votes y'all gave!). I really needed to wait and see how S3 played out before I could figure out the best route.

I don't want to give away any spoilers (just in case someone's reading this who hasn't watched all of S1... which, y'all, if you haven't - why are you reading this!?) but just know that I've heard you all, your voices count, and I really think you're gonna like where this goes!

I really, really appreciate your patience. Those of you that have been here since day 1, you've waited a long time! The good news is, I have this story planned out all the way through the end of S3 and I plan to finish what I started.

That all being said, I hope you really like this chapter, and I'm so excited for you guys to follow Ally through this wild ride! Comments are super appreciated - I want to know what you guys think!